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COBALT-SERIES



今野緒雪

いとしき歳月
(前編)

さくら様がみるる

Volume 7

Beloved Times - Part 1

Prologue

"Gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou."

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary's garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field's greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

In early March, not long before the graduation ceremony, she ran into Rosa Gigantea in the hallway and Rosa Gigantea suddenly asked:

What did they mean with the "swiftly" part of "think back swiftly?"

It was a lyric from the graduation song, Aogeba Totoshi.

Having been asked that without any kind of preface, she was hard pressed to answer. No, even if there had been a preface, she probably wouldn't have been able to answer. Because for all the times she'd sung that song, she'd never thought about the meaning of its lyrics.

On top of that, Rosa Gigantea had informed her that it was "swiftly." Looking over the lyrics sheet, she realized this was correct, and was surprised by it.

If she had been asked, "So, what did you think it was?" then she would have answered equivocally, "I thought it was "sweetly."""

However that was the extent of the conversation.

But for some reason it stuck in her mind.

Think back swiftly, rather than that

Think back sweetly, seemed somehow better.

Looking back, at sweetness, if that was how she thought of her school days, wouldn't that be really happy?

Yellow Rose at Full Speed

The Beginning

Part 1.

The girls had gathered after school in their room of the clubhouse building.

"So, both Rosa Foetida and Rosa Chinensis scored high in their exams."

Tsukiyama Minako, head of the newspaper club, put tick marks against some notes in her notebook then raised her head. She was talking softly, but she wasn't doing anything wrong.

It was simply a habit of hers. Call it an occupational hazard.

It goes without saying, but the newspaper club produced the school newspaper.

Stories leaking before they were published was a life-and-death matter. Newspapers dealt with the "new." If all they served up was stale old gossip, it couldn't be called a newspaper. It would be brand-new day-old news. Call it an oldspaper – and who wants that.

At any rate, for Tsukiyama Minako (17 years old) who lived and died by the scoop, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that the only time she spoke loudly in the clubroom was when the printer was running at full bore. Comparatively, the number of times she actually had a scoop were quite low. But that was something that was better not discussed.

"I imagine it was only a one-in-a-million shot that they'd fail, but I regret to inform you that they passed the entrance exams for the universities they applied to."

Minako's soeur, Yamaguchi Mami, said briskly. What was with her deadpan tone? She'd been getting excited about their conversation, but just like that, her spirits had dropped.

"All three of them turned down the priority placement system, electing to sit exams. I suppose it shows their determination and sense of purpose ... Although that's probably related to their likelihood of success."

As she'd expected from the results, there didn't seem to be much of interest there. Minako participated in the conversation in a half-hearted manner, as she sorted through her "Lillian Kawaraban" file. In terms of popularity, the Valentines special edition was right at the top.

"So then, which universities are they going to?"

One of the other first-years asked, intensely curious. Yes, that was the right response. A demand for information.

"Don't know yet."

Minako answered, shaking her head.

"I've been trying all my sources, but with no success. Either they're not talking, or they really don't know."

"Ah, your sources ..."

The non-Mami first-years (there were three of them, so call them Club Member A, B and C for convenience. Naturally, Minako knew the name of her club members, but it's not relevant to the main story) had knowing and dubious expressions as they repeated this back.

Her sources.

Speaking plainly, it was everyone close to the Rose Mansion. While she would have liked to charge straight at the Roses themselves, pretty much all of the third-year classes were just self-study at this point and the classrooms were practically deserted during breaks, so her chances of meeting the people she wanted to was low.

So she'd changed her sights to the Roses' petit soeurs, and their petit soeurs, but that was proving equally tough.

Even if the boutons were keeping quiet, it looked like their petit soeurs really didn't know.

Rosa Foetida en bouton's petit soeur, Shimazu Yoshino, was more devious than her looks suggested, but she wasn't as interested in her Rosa

Foetida as she was in "Rei-chan," so she ended their conversation by saying, "I don't know."

Rosa Chinensis en bouton's petit soeur, Fukuzawa Yumi, was the type of person whose face showed when they were lying. Based on her reaction, she definitely didn't know.

"But anyway."

Club Member A let out a sigh.

"Why do you think the Roses sat entrance exams?"

Club Members B and C both agreed with her, saying, "Right, right."

Students who had boarded the Lillian's escalator very rarely went down.

The environment was good and the campus was spacious.

Due to its history there was a well stocked library, as well as the latest equipment. Studying wasn't done for an exam, but for the pure pursuit of knowledge. Those immersed in this pressure-free school lifestyle rarely wanted to rush out into the outside world.

On the flip side, it didn't instill the attitude needed for exams. And without that attitude, very few students sat entrance exams for other schools. A chicken-and-egg situation.

"Maybe it's simply that Lillian's University doesn't offer the courses they want to do."

Minako voiced her deduction.

Right.

Those who where aiming high would strive for their goals, regardless of something like a test-taking attitude.

"Or perhaps they'd like to further their studies alongside boys."

Kyaa. Club Members A, B and C's shoulders all jumped up and down in excitement.

First-years were so simple-minded. – Except for one.

"That line of thinking wouldn't apply to Rosa Gigantea, though."

Murmured the one non-cute first-year, Mami.

"Why's that?"

"It's just that, it was getting towards the end of the year when she suddenly started thinking about continuing her education."

"Mmm."

Maybe she had heard something like that somewhere. Minako wordlessly agreed. That Mami, had she been digging up dirt on her own?

"And by that time, it seems like all the priority placement slots were filled – so, in a rush, she joined the examination group."

Why the change of heart? Still, it was quite impressive that Rosa Gigantea was sitting entrance exams after studying for only one or two months. She didn't look like the honors student type, but she could perform when she had to.

"Rosa Chinensis doesn't seem to be the kind of person to leave for that sort of reason either."

That sort of reason.

Going to a co-ed university because she wanted to get closer to boys. Umm, the exquisite Rosa Chinensis is. – Indeed, that wasn't the case. Minako agreed with this.

"But Rosa Foetida, on the other hand. She has an urge to go wherever it looks like she'll experience something interesting."

How did she know that? Minako felt a little bit envious that Mami could talk so dispassionately about a subject that Minako was so fascinated by. She should have been happy to see her cute junior maturing, but Minako was a human and not a saint, so she couldn't just accept it.

(When I was a first-year, I was a more obedient, innocent child.)

Hey now, hey now. That was getting off the point at hand.

While she may be in a bit of a slump at the moment, Tsukiyama Minako, head of the newspaper club, could still land a huge scoop unattainable to the likes of Mami, if she felt like it.

Right. The soeur relationship was akin to master and apprentice. Eternal competitors.

"Rosa Foetida ..."

Club Member A muttered, just as Minako was burning with competitiveness.

"What?"

Minako bit into the tempting morsel, setting aside the matter of her petit soeur for now. While Rosa Foetida herself tended to pursue whatever she found interesting, Minako's favorite food was the interesting things that other people did.

"Nothing. It's just, I saw her the other day ... that's all."

"Where?"

"At the amusement park. Last Saturday evening."

"The amusement park?"

The truth was Club Member A was considered something of an amusement park fanatic by those in the know. On a related note, the way she had her hair in buns on either side of her head resembled a certain amusement park mouse.

"Who was she with?"

Thinking that perhaps it was the whole Yellow Rose family, Minako rued her missed opportunity. Lots of soeurs would go places together before graduation, to make some memories. If she had known, she would have been compelled to give it in-depth coverage.

"Onee-sama. Please think things through further."

Mami interjected, amazed.

"I haven't said anything yet."

"Even though you haven't said anything, I can tell what you're thinking."

Mami was probably on the money, so Minako fell silent. From time to time she'd shiver from the way it seemed like Mami could read her mind completely. In reality, Mami wasn't psychic, but Minako hadn't realized how incredibly straightforward and easy to grasp her own personality was.

"Since she went to that amusement park in the afternoon, it's natural to assume she stayed overnight."

"Well, I guess."

A day trip wasn't impossible, but the amusement park was outside the capital. If she wanted to return the same day, the typical thing to do would be to choose a day when she could go in the morning.

"But the following Sunday was which day?"

"The following Sunday? Sunday, Sunday, ... ah, the day of the Valentine's gifts."

Minako stood, intentionally using ambiguous words, just in case some unknown person was listening.

"Correct. Please sit down."

Mami coldly ordered. Was she a game-show host?

"More accurately, it was the day of the half-day dates that were prizes for the winners of the Valentine's Day Treasure Hunt event."

"... Pedant."

"Thank-you."

Her parted forelocks were secured tightly with a hair-clip, so simply moving her head didn't dishevel her hairdo. The underlying concept behind Mami's hairstyle may well have been "rock-solid."

"I don't think Rei-sama would be going away on an overnight trip when her half-day date was the following day."

Just like that, the Yellow Rose family memory-making connection was cut. While Club Member A had returned the following morning and gone to work for the newspaper club (covering the dates), it was unthinkable that the leading lady, Hasekura Rei-sama, would walk such a tightrope. Plus her petit soeur, Shimazu Yoshino, had shown up at the K station bookstore as though she'd just gone out shopping.

"Umm ... "

Now that the soeur dialogue had ended, Club Member A resumed her interrupted story.

"Rosa Foetida was with a guy, though."

"A guy!?"

Everyone, apart from Club Member A, including Minako and the usually cool Mami, bit at the word "guy." There had never even been a hint of a man around the three Roses. If, prior to graduation, a boyfriend came to light then it would be an unprecedented scandal. No doubt, it would be quite the scoop.

"A twenty ... no, twenty-five or six year old gentleman was walking with her, arm-in-arm, so when I first saw them I thought I might have been mistaken."

"Arm-in-arm!"

As expected, this was much more interesting than her choice of university. While they attended a school for young ladies, the students were all flesh-and-blood teenage girls. They probably wouldn't mind a love story. It would probably be very well received, in fact.

"We have to print this."

At that moment, Minako was wondering if it was alright to bump the commemorative graduation edition they were planning to publish in two weeks time. If necessary, they could always print a special edition.

However.

"This man, was he tall and lanky with silver glasses?"

Club Member B asked Club Member A an unusual question.

"No? He was well built, like an athlete."

"Oh my. Was he tall, and kind of high strung?"

Even Club Member C. Listing quite specific traits, like she knew something.

"What is this?"

Minako and Mami both asked at about the same time. They were partners in being left behind by the conversation, well, that's soeurs for you. They looked at each other grumpily.

"I saw her too. Friday last week, from memory. Holding hands in an art gallery."



That was Club Member B. Similarly for Club Member C:

"A restaurant. Sunday evening. His arm around her shoulder as they left
—"

...

Silence descended upon the newspaper club's clubroom.

Rosa Foetida went out every day, from Friday through Saturday.

Well, that sort of thing happened. – For the time being, they tried to come up with an innocent explanation for it.

But, going out with a different man each time, and acting intimately with each of them? Since three of the five people present had witnessed such an event, if they went out and gathered more information, perhaps they'd find out about a lot more such occurrences.

"We've never even heard about Rosa Foetida and a guy until now ... "

But no matter how much feelings strayed, there were some things that weren't possible.

Using just this information, it was asking too much of any newspaper club member to arrive at a truth that their readers would accept.

Part 2.

Testimony of Club Member A (Alias)

This happened Saturday last week. I'd gone to the amusement park.

Well, obviously it wasn't a school holiday, so I went in the afternoon. I was coming back the next morning, so I changed my clothes before leaving. Our house is almost exactly halfway between Lillian's and the amusement park, so that was no big deal.

Ah, I went by train. Just like I always do. I left an overnight bag at my cousin's house, then went straight to the amusement park. One of my older cousins, an amusement park buddy. I've got an annual pass, so I go whenever I've got the time. It took pretty much all my New Year's gift money. Well, I enjoy it, so what can you do.

Right, right, about Rosa Foetida.

I was about to enter the amusement park when a couple came walking over from the carpark. Very lovey-dovey. Arms joined. Bodies close together.

It's rude to stare, so I turned away from temptation and went to the entrance, but that girl's voice wafted past from behind, and I felt like I'd heard it somewhere, so I instinctively turned around. At that point, I knew it was Rosa Foetida.

Boy was I surprised.

It seemed like a completely different person to the usually cool Rosa Foetida.

Are you sure it really wasn't a different person, you say. Perhaps. It was quite dark.

But I don't think I'm wrong.

Because it stuck in mind, although there wasn't anything I could do about it, but then I spotted the couple in the crowd watching a parade while I was lined up for one of the rides.

When I saw them I thought, "Ah, that's Rosa Foetida." The couple were in their own private world, completely oblivious to me.

The man's appearance ... Let's see, his height was about 170cm. Mid to late twenties ... I don't think he would have been thirty. I'm not sure. Depending on the location, his impression seemed to change ... if it was dark, or he was beside the light, or he was in a shop in the arcade, that sort of thing.

Oh, my cousin's house? It's about ten minutes walk from the train station near the amusement park ... no, more like fifteen minutes.

It's really lucky. You can't fully enjoy yourself if you're always worrying about the time. It's not like I'd be able to stay overnight at a hotel or anything.

Come to think of it, I wonder what Rosa Foetida did.

It seems like they stayed there quite late. I wonder if her companion drove her home. Ahh, I wish I was going out with a guy with a car too.

(Sigh)

Testimony of Club Member B (Alias (Obviously))

Last Friday.

I saw Rosa Foetida at an art gallery in the city. Lithographs, I think they're called. An exhibition of woodblock prints. I'm not all that interested in it, but one of my dad's work clients has some connection to the gallery, so I went with my mom using the free tickets we got.

I tell you, my dad's even more clueless about art than me. So he makes us go, listens to our opinions, then acts like he went and saw it. Sneaky, right? Because of that, we don't have a single art book that hasn't got his notes scrawled all over it. Such a pain.

Ah, you got me. That's the reason I missed club activities on Friday.

It closed at 7, so going there after club activities wouldn't have been possible. I could have gone straight there, but I stopped at home for a little while, then went out still wearing my school uniform. All this just so my parents could show off, it's a tough life.

Rosa Foetida was wearing plain clothes.

At this time of year, third-years come and go from school as they please. For exams and the like. Rosa Foetida may not have even been to school that day. Or maybe she was there in the morning, then left sometime in the afternoon.

Her partner was lanky, with silver-rimmed glasses ... How can I put this, he had a sort of less fashionable look about him. Ah, his hair was parted to the side too.

If I had to say, he seemed a bit old-fashioned or stiff. But he wasn't old as such. About 30. Like a civil servant, or a bank worker, or a researcher ... that sort of type.

Ahh, dowdy. That sounds about right.

He was holding hands. With Rosa Foetida.

Holding hands with a high-school girl, I'd call that pretty flashy. But a date at an art gallery is kind of dowdy. Anyway, they seemed to be enjoying it. Both of them.

Me?

It was tough.

Rosa Foetida was a little bit ahead of us, so I had to go slowly, staring at the boring display items and restraining my mom so that I wouldn't be spotted.

Because it'd be a pain, right? It'd be awkward for Rosa Foetida if she saw me wearing the Lillian's uniform, and if my mom knew that the girl in that couple was Rosa Foetida, she'd make a scene –

Right?

Testimony of Club Member C (Alias (This is getting annoying))

Indeed, he was tall, which did give his body a sort of lean impression overall. But I wouldn't say he was lanky.

His hairdo? Let's see, it had been lightened and flowed in a loose manner.

He was smartly dressed. He didn't have silver-rimmed glasses either. In his black, brand-name long coat, he looked like a model.

Yes. I saw them at a restaurant. A French restaurant, a short walk from the station, that turns down TV and magazine coverage, relying on word of mouth. Some time back, one of my relatives was married at the church behind it and the reception was held there, with all the families eating together. The atmosphere and the food was so good that we all wanted to go there again.

Last Sunday was my parents' wedding anniversary, so they made reservations, and our family of four went together. Ah, no. That was the day of Rosa Foetida en bouton and Rosa Gigantea en bouton's half-day date, and we were on a stakeout around K station well into the evening, so I'd arranged to meet them there.

No way, I wasn't scoping out the restaurant. It was just a complete coincidence that I saw Rosa Foetida. I noticed her when she left her seat during dinner, and when she came back I confirmed it was her. She was seated at a table about 5 metres from ours.

Right, just her and the gentleman.

I only saw them as they were going past, but it looked like they ordered the most expensive dishes. From the outset, my parents said some dishes were off limits, and it seemed like these expensive dishes were carried past me over and over again.

Huh? If they were in a restaurant, why was he wearing a coat? Ahh, well obviously he left his coat in the cloakroom when he came in to the restaurant.

They finished eating before us, so I saw him put it on as they were leaving. He put his arm gently around Rosa Foetida's shoulder.

Come to think of it, Rosa Foetida had the women's version of that coat ... if they were a couple, I wonder if it was a present from him.

He was young, but he must have been pretty rich.

Part 3.

"They must know that the walls have ears, but still they were careless."

The widely acknowledged ace of the Lillian's Girls Academy high-school photography club, Takeshima Tsutako-san, laughed.

It was after school.

The students with club activities had scattered to the various club rooms, ovals and gymnasiums, while those not in a club had mostly gone home, but Fukuzawa Yumi remained in the classroom. She had been about to head towards the high-school student council building, the "Rose Mansion," when she was forcibly detained by Tsutako-san.

"Tsutako-san, you weren't just asked to join the debate club, you were also asked to join the drama club, weren't you?"

Yumi asked, stunned, and Tsutako-san responded suggestively with a suppressed laugh. From that response, it seemed so. But on that front, perhaps she had a ways to go yet.

Tsutako-san had just finished relaying the evidence provided by the three first-year newspaper club members, even imitating their voices.

Apparently the newspaper club members were unaware that Tsutako-san was in the room next door, and had forgotten that the printer wasn't running, so in their excitement their voices had become quite loud.

"Lacking a natural immunity, girls raised at an all-girls school tend to get excited talking about boys. It's such a shame that they couldn't control themselves."

Ignoring the fact that she'd been raised at an all-girls school too, Tsutako-san gazed sympathetically in the direction of the clubhouse. As far as Yumi was aware, Tsutako-san had never gone out with anyone either.

" – and this is photographic proof."

"..."

Photographic proof. The words echoed in Yumi's mind.

"This – "

"You should be able to tell just by looking. Who that is."

"Well, of course I know that."

It was undoubtedly Rosa Foetida in the photographs that had been spread out across the desk. But what Yumi didn't know was why Tsutako-san had taken these photographs.

"It backs up what the newspaper club was saying. I thought I'd see what I could find, and – "

"This ... is like the work of a detective or private investigator."

All the photos looked like they'd been taken secretly. To Yumi it looked like it was bordering on criminal.

"It's both during the week and on weekends. Their ages cover a broad range from twenties to fifties, and they're all different types. About the only common feature was that all the men spent money freely."

"How do you know?"

"For one thing, they were all wearing expensive clothes. Plus where they went on their dates. I don't know about the earlier ones, but the ones I saw were all quite pricey."

High-class restaurant. High-class hotel pool. A present of a high-class brand suit, plus matching shoes and bag.

"Incredible."

High-class, high-class, high-class.

A smorgasbord of high-class.

It was a phrase that Yumi wasn't well acquainted with in her life. About the only thing she had was her high-class onee-sama.

"Yeah, it makes you envious, doesn't it? Say, Yumi-san, in the world we live in, do you think it's possible to get something for nothing?"

"..."

"There's always a hidden side to something that seems too good to be true. Those things acquired with such apparent ease would still involve some form of compensation."

"And that's ... what?"

"Indeed."

"Indeed?"

So either Tsutako-san really didn't know, or she meant, "Think about it on your own," or she simply didn't want to say. Either way, it meant she wasn't going to explain further.

"What about these?"

Yumi pointed at the photographs, taken from various angles in various locations, showing Rosa Foetida together with different gentlemen.

"They're yours, Yumi-san."

"Mine?"

"If it's too much of a burden, tear them to shreds and throw them in your bin at home. It's no bother."

Since Tsutako-san would still have the negatives. It seemed that, having stuck her nose into someone else's business, now she was trying to draw other people in.

"It's just a feeling I've got. I don't want the newspaper club stirring things up, like during the Yellow Rose Revolution. So I followed her, pretending to be a detective. I've got a bad feeling about what would happen if they turned this into a newspaper article."

"A bad feeling ... "

"These glasses of mine, they bring things into focus, but they don't add color, so to speak."

"Mmm."

"But this, this steadily changed them into sunglasses."

"Huh?"

"So with this, I pass the baton to you with your 20-20 vision. Best of luck."

"Best of luck, huh."

Such a dilemma. However, Tsutako-san quickly gathered the photographs spread out across the desk and stuffed them into Yumi's hand.

"When Rei-sama discusses it, you can use these as proof."

"You want me to talk to Rei-sama?"

Student #30 on the second-year chrysanthemum class roll, Hasekura Rei-sama was Rosa Foetida's petit soeur.

"No, that's not what I said."

Tsutako-san responded, as she rose from the chair. While it wasn't what she said, it was still an option.

"Tsutako-san."

"I'm sorry I detained you for so long. Shouldn't you be going to the Rose Mansion soon?"

Tsutako-san picked up Yumi's school bag and offered it to her. Looking at the clock, they'd been talking for fifteen minutes already.

"Gokigenyou."

Yumi took her bag, and hastily turned towards the exit.

"Ah, Yumi-san."

"Yes?"

When she turned around, Tsutako-san mumbled, "Nothing. Sorry." Apparently it wasn't all that important.

"I just thought, because it's you Yumi-san, you might go directly to Rosa Foetida and get an answer from her."

Tsutako-san said, then waved good-bye. Although what she meant by that, Yumi had no idea.

Part 4.

The photographs were put into a pocket of her school uniform. The internal pocket between the pleats of her skirt. A place that couldn't be seen from outside.

Where Rosa Foetida was going and what she was doing wasn't something that Yumi wanted to meddle in.

What should she do about this unearthing of Rosa Foetida's private life?

Perhaps that sort of thinking was why Tsutako-san had withdrawn from the matter. But even if that was true, handing these photographs over to someone else would be problematic. Just what should she do about them?

She couldn't just put a photograph of somebody in the bin. Much less tear it to shreds. It would be disrespectful.

Creak, creak, creak, creak.

The worn-out staircase in the Rose Mansion groaned as she climbed to the second floor.

If the staircase gave way, and she went tumbling head over heels right now – . Such thoughts would occasionally pass through Yumi's head, usually when she was worrying about something.

Like when she left for school in the morning determined to finish a report that was due that afternoon during the lunch break. If something were to happen, then her teacher would find out that she hadn't finished the report, so she mustn't die.

Or when she left home knowing that one of the seams of her petticoat was coming apart, but she didn't have PE that day, and didn't have time to change it. If she were rushed to a hospital emergency room, then they'd see her petticoat, so she mustn't suffer a serious injury.

If she really was in a life-threatening situation or suffered a serious injury, then she wouldn't have time to worry about reports or underwear, but as a student of Lillian's, and a pubescent girl, such were her concerns.

Creak, creak, creak, creak.

Right now, if the stairway collapsed and she landed badly, she might die. What would everyone think when the peeping-tom photographs of Rosa Foetida crawled out of her corpse's pocket? – Therefore, she mustn't die.

Heeding the warnings about her potential funeral, Yumi finished climbing the stairs.

The wooden staircase had been creaking for a few years now, but it wasn't about to collapse. Everyone said that if something that big was going to give way, there would be early warning signs. Rosa Gigantea joked about it, saying, "It'll be fine at least until your petit soeur graduates, Yumi-chan."

(...)

Setting aside the matter of the staircase, Yumi felt that the best thing to do was to give the photographs to Rosa Foetida.

But having said that.

Yumi didn't know when the third-years would come to school, and to carry them around continuously would be a bit of a chore. She'd constantly have to watch out for traffic accidents, and so on.

"Sorry I'm late ... huh."

Yumi burst through the biscuit door,

"Hi."

and was immediately deflated by what she saw in the room.

Sitting alone at the large table was first-year chrysanthemum class member Shimazu Yoshino-san, who had half raised her right hand to wave a greeting.

"Where is everyone?"

Yumi asked, placing her bag and coat on her usual seat. While it was normal that the third-years weren't present, there was no sign of either of the second-years, Yoshino-san's onee-sama, Hasekura Rei-sama, and Yumi's onee-sama, Sachiko-sama, or Yumi's classmate Toudou Shimako-san.

"Not here yet."

Yoshino answered acting bored, no, she probably was actually bored, as she poured Yumi a cup of tea.

"Oh, all three of them?"

"Well, I'm sure they have all sorts of things to do. They're becoming Roses."

"... I see."

The student council elections were over, and in truth the boutons had largely taken over the job of the Roses.

"Even us, we're going to have to do our best from here on."

"That's true."

As they faced each other sipping their tea, the pair let out sighs to rival the steam rising from their teacups. After the school entrance ceremony in April, they would attain the position of bouton. The duties of a bouton were to provide proper support for their onee-samas, officially called "Roses."

But in the current situation, without their onee-samas, there was nothing the little sisters could do. Time passed slowly. Hmm. It was quite boring, although probably not as bad as it had been for Yoshino-san earlier. There were homework printouts in her bag, but Yumi wasn't in the mood for that just now. She couldn't divert her attention to other matters while she was waiting for the people she expected to arrive.

In this situation, chatting was probably the proper way to kill the time.

(But even so ...)

Since they met every day, there was nothing new to talk about.

Even without a topic of conversation, their relationship was such that they could pass the time together without feeling awkward, so there was no need to force herself to find something to talk about. But seeing her companion so bored she was yawning and fiddling with her braids, Yumi tried to think of something interesting to offer.

(At this point, Komori-sensei making a fool of herself onstage is old news ...)

With no-one looking on, Yumi made various faces for a minute as she thought. While she couldn't come up with something interesting to talk about, there was something she wanted to borrow Yoshino-san's insight into.

"Yoshino-san."

"What?"

Yoshino-san raised her head listlessly.

"There isn't an easy way to get hold of the third-years, is there?"

"What do you mean?"

Twitch. Her eyebrows raised.

Was that concern in there?

"I want to see Rosa Foetida, but I don't know when she'll be at school."

"Why don't you call her and find out directly?"

Her curtly uttered answer was simple and direct.

"... Ah, right."

Until then, Yumi hadn't even contemplated telephoning the third-years.

That was Yoshino-san for you.

"Why do you want to see Rosa Foetida?"

"A classmate asked me to give her something."

"Hmm."

With that, Yoshino-san quickly withdrew. If it had been related to Rei-sama, she probably would have bit down, asking who it was that asked her, and what they wanted to give her.

"I guess I should give her a call."

Yoshino-san said, "Yeah," and stood up.

"Huh, now?"

"Strike while the iron is hot. Come on, up you get, Yumi-san."

"Uh, strike?"

"Stop splitting hairs."

Yoshino-san tugged hard on her arm. Was this a trait common to all Yellow Rose family members? That they were drawn like a magnet whenever something slightly interesting seemed to be happening.

"But our onnee-samas."

"We'll be straight back, so it should be okay. It's not like there's a meeting scheduled. It's just a voluntary gathering."

That was indeed true. But the reason Yumi was there was because she was waiting for her onee-sama. If she wasn't going to wait, she'd probably be better off going home. In Yoshino-san's case, her onee-sama was her "next door neighbor Rei-chan," so she was more at leisure.

In the end, Yoshino-san dragged Yumi to the front of the office. It was the location of the only phone the students were allowed access to, a pay telephone.

Yoshino-san picked up the receiver, slid Yumi's offered telephone card into the lime green body and quickly punched in a phone number. Apparently she'd memorized it.

Ring-ring, ring-ring. As the tone rang out, she passed the receiver to Yumi.

"Huh, you're not going to talk to her?"

"So naïve."

Implying that if she hadn't done that, Yumi would have dithered in front of the telephone. Apparently she knew her well.

While this was going on, the call was connected.

"Hello, Torii residence."

A lady's voice came through the handset. There was no running away now.

"Ah, I'm Lillian's Girls Academy first-year high-school student Fukuzawa Yumi. Is Rosa Foe ... ah, is Eriko-sama available to talk?"

Yoshino-san silently clapped.

"Well, thank-you for always taking care of Eriko."

It was probably Rosa Foetida's mother. She had a calm and gentle voice.

"No, not at all, she's always gently guiding me ... "

Mumble mumble. Her words trailed off. It was tough talking to an adult. Especially over the phone, where she couldn't see their face.

"Eriko's ... "

The mother's voice suddenly turned hazy. Then, after a short pause, she continued.

"Not home just yet."

"Do you know when she will return?"

"..."

"Uhh."

"I don't know."

She didn't know. That seemed a bit odd. Normally a high-school-aged girl would say what time they were coming back before they went out, right? But each family probably had their own rules regarding curfews and the like, so Yumi rethought her strategy and asked:

"I'm at school right now, would it be a bother if I called again later tonight?"

If Yumi had simply said, "Is that so?" and hung up, then it would have been a waste of her phone credit.

"Tonight?"

She heard a bewildered voice coming from the other end of the phone-line.

"Yes, what time would be good?"

Apparently covering Yumi's question, Rosa Foetida's mother answered:

"About that."

"Yes?"

"She might not be back today ... "

"Huh!?"

That answer had not been what Yumi was expecting. A sleepover. So no matter what time she called that night, Rosa Foetida would not be there.

"Ah, no, she's staying at a relative's house."

Yumi didn't know what the "Ah, no," was about, since Rosa Foetida's mother was offering a denial before she had even said anything.

"A relative's house."

"I'm not sure when she'll be back."

"Alright. When you do get in contact with her, please tell her that Fukuzawa called."

"Fukuzawa-san. Got it."

"Thank-you."

"Goodbye."

With her head bowed, Yumi counted, "One, two, three," in her mind then returned the receiver to its original position.

Beep beep, beep beep. Her telephone card was spat out.

"She said she's staying overnight at a relative's house."

Yoshino-san's arms were folded, a doubtful look on her face.

"Suspicious."

"What is?"

Yumi asked, as she put the telephone card back into her purse.

"What? I can't quite put my finger on it exactly. But there's something suspicious."

Her sixth-sense, perhaps? Yumi knew that, from Yoshino-san, that wasn't something to be sneezed at. She had a touch of ESP.

"How long has she been at her relative's place?"

Yoshino-san asked, as they walked down the corridor.

"I didn't ask that much. Two, three days perhaps?"

Yumi looked into space. The answer wasn't written there, however.

"Two, three days? That makes it even more suspicious."

That look in Yoshino-san's eyes. It closely resembled the president of the newspaper club's.

"But why?"

"Because I saw her yesterday and today."

"Where, who?"

"At school, Rosa Foetida."

Even without any explanation, you should understand. Yoshino-san didn't actually say that, but it was obviously implied.

"She's staying at her relative's house and still coming to school?"

They both looked out the window and said, "Hmm."

There was still more of the cold to come, but sprouts were just starting to appear on the trees. Compared to humans and the like, the trees were far more in tune with the seasons. Yumi spotted the school's resident stray cat, Lunch, scampering from school building to school building through the courtyard.

"Her relatives could live in the city."

Yumi had thought hard, and this was the conclusion she'd deduced.

"Yeah, that's a possibility."

Yoshino-san initially agreed heartily, but then continued as though something didn't make sense.

"But why go to the effort of staying overnight? Especially since she's still coming to school. Normally she'd go home, right? Especially given the distance."

"That's true."

Rosa Foetida's house wasn't quite as close to school as Yoshino-san's, but it wasn't far away. If she was going to school the following day, even if it was late at night, it would be more convenient for her to return home.

"Her grandmother might be seriously ill, or something."

If she'd said that her last dying wish was to see her adorable granddaughter's face, then that could be a reason why she'd stay overnight.

"... In that case, isn't it more likely that Rosa Foetida's mother would hurry over before the granddaughter in high-school."

Yoshino-san instantly rejected Yumi's idea. Although Rosa Foetida's grandmother could be either her mother's mother, or her mother's mother-in-law.

"Hmm."

Casually killing off someone else's grandmother warranted a little contemplation.

"It might just be for tonight, if there was something she couldn't get out of."

" – I know that. So in that case, she'll be absent tomorrow?"

If there was something she couldn't get out of.

"Uh huh."

They weren't any closer to understanding. Since they weren't any closer, they left it alone for the moment, deciding to halt their suppositions. Until tomorrow. Or perhaps the day after that. They didn't have to rush, Rosa Foetida would come to school soon, and she might fill them in on why she had been staying at a relative's house.

They spotted the boutons walking down the corridor ahead of them.

They jogged after them, so that they'd all arrive at the Rose Mansion at the same time.

"Oh my. What were you two doing?"

Sachiko-sama asked.

"Making a phone call."

Yumi answered concisely, since explaining everything would be a pain.

"A phone call?"

Rei-sama repeated.

"There was something we wanted to check on, okay."

Yoshino-san winked at Yumi as she took Rei-sama's hand. The staircase creaked as they all climbed the stairs together. Since it could take the weight of five people at once, it looked like it still had a fair bit of life in it.

"Was it tomorrow's weather forecast?"

Shimako-san asked melodiously.

"Well, something like that."

Yumi smiled as she opened the biscuit door first.

The Rosa Foetida school forecast.

– But would the pair's forecast predictions match reality?

Rabbit and Cat and Wolf

Part 1.

If life continued like this, she'd become spoiled.

In the cafe opening onto the hotel lobby, Eriko sighed. The ice floating in her fresh juice shifted as it melted. Water condensed on the side of the glass and made a faint sound.

The person she was waiting for still hadn't arrived. She opened her diary and put a cross through yesterday's date. At any rate, all she could do was take it one day at a time.

The pink sweater and matching skirt brought to the hotel had been at the request of her partner for today's date. The fluffy collar was real rabbit fur. He liked that sort of thing.

Based on the time it had arrived at the hotel, he'd slipped out during his lunch break to buy it. The way it had been wrapped like a present was nice, but the receipt that had still been in the paper bag when it had been given to the front desk slipped out. While it had been purchased with a credit card, it was a startlingly expensive set of clothing.

But even so, just how much was their monthly salary? This evening's hotel bill, tickets to classical ballet and dinner, all paid for by him, and to top it all off, these clothes as a gift.

One of them would splurge, which would kick off an endless cycle where they all tried to outspend the previous one.

How many days so far had she not returned home?

Her sole salvation was that they were all corporate employees, so during the day she could escape to school and have an afternoon nap.

"Eriko-chan."

Seeing the man happily waving at her, Eriko fired herself up with a "Let's do this," and smiled broadly at him.

"Thanks for the clothes. You like?"

Rising from the chair, she cocked her head.

"Very cute. Like a little bunny rabbit."

He nodded, satisfied.

"Shall we go?"

"Yeah."

His right hand picked up the bill, while his left entwined itself with Eriko's arm. It was something necessary so that they could enjoy their time together. It was a lie, but he was under the impression it was "fun."

Part 2.

The following day Rosa Foetida, Torii Eriko-sama, showed up at school.
(Which means she came to school from her relative's house ...)

Like Yoshino-san, Yumi had a "that's suspicious" look on her face as she thought this.

That probably meant it wasn't something that she couldn't get out of. Seeing Rosa Foetida walking down the corridor towards her, it was hard to believe that she'd spent the night somewhere other than her house since she looked the same as usual.

Her schoolbag looked light, as though it didn't have any textbooks in it, let alone the standard overnight kit of toothbrush, towel and face cream.

"Yumi-chan."

Rosa Foetida approached, waving innocently.

"Rosa Foetida, gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou. It's been a while. I've seen Yoshino-chan flitting around every so often, but – "

(Huh!?)

As Rosa Foetida ran her hand through her hair with a faraway look in her eyes, Yumi couldn't overlook what she'd spotted on her chest.

(Her tie – !)

Rosa Foetida's tie, famed for being the most beautiful sailor collar tie in the entire school, looked disheveled today.

"Huh? What?"

Seeing Yumi lost for words and instinctively pointing, Rosa Foetida laughed and said, "Ah, this?"

"It got creased in a strange place when it was ironed. To hide that, I had to shift the knot over."

"Ahh, the crease – "

After agreeing with this, the obvious follow-up question was, "Who ironed it?"

"Rosa Foetida, where did you come from today?"

"Where did I come from?"

As she said this, Rosa Foetida made a pose like a karate practitioner taking a blow. It was probably surprise. An easily understandable reaction.

"Actually, yesterday, I called your house. They told me you were out ... "

"Ahh – "

Rosa Foetida nodded haltingly, comprehension dawning. Apparently she'd planned to remain silent if Yumi hadn't known she'd spent the night away from home.

"You stayed overnight at a relative's house, right?"

"A relative? Ah, a relative ... right, yeah, that's it."

So inarticulate. It was like this was the first time she'd heard that the place she stayed last night was a "relative's house," and her response was seeking to confirm that.

"Yeah. There was some business that had to be attended to. I was helping out at a relative's house."

Rosa Foetida offered as an explanation, as though to compensate for her earlier words.

"Did you have trouble sleeping? Your eyes look red."

"I did. It's a tough life when you're working. At least I can escape to school during the day. If I go to the library, I'll probably doze off though."

"Escape during the day? So you're going back tonight?"

"Pretty much ... Ah, right. You rang my house, didn't you Yumi-chan? What did you want to talk to me about?"

" – Nothing."

Yumi shook her head.

"I just wanted to ask when you were going to be back at school."

"Really? Well, my exams are finished, so I'll be here most days. Although I'll probably show up late and leave early."

"Is that so?"

Yumi put her hand in her skirt pocket just to check, but in the end she couldn't hand those photographs over.

Rosa Foetida was obviously lying.

At the very least, she hadn't spent last night at a relative's house.

Yumi had merely caught a glimpse of it. The slip of paper attached to her collar was unquestionably from a cleaning service. Sadly, the 20-20 vision of which she was so proud had no problem resolving the symbols written there.

OO Hotel.

The logo of a famous hotel in the metropolitan area was proudly displayed.

Rosa Foetida was most definitely the enigmatic Rosa Foetida from the photographs.

Part 3.

What had Rosa Foetida been doing staying overnight at a hotel?

Based on her rabbit-like red eyes attributed to lack of sleep, it would appear as though the purpose of her stay hadn't been rest.

Rosa Foetida's mother had said that she was staying at a relative's house, and why would she lie? Would it somehow be bad if people from school found out about her staying away overnight?

And had Rosa Foetida spent the night at the hotel by herself?

– The more she thought about it, the less she knew.

If she had handed over the photographs, then that would have been the end of it. But Yumi couldn't simply pretend that she didn't know anything.

"It's an example, okay."

Yoshino-san placed her chin on her unopened lunch box, and spoke as though bored.

"Using examples is fine, but you're censoring too much Yumi-san. I can't make heads or tails of what you're saying."

"Oh, really?"

Yumi cocked her head at censoring.

"Yes really."

Yoshino-san snorted.

"Suppose there was a high-school student, and this person was at a certain place and happened to see a high-school senior with a guy. And then another student saw the same senior at a different place, and she was with a guy at that time too, but it was a different one to the one before ... that's what you said. And it just went on and on in that manner, so annoyingly vague."

Yoshino-san acted like she was tearing out her hair.

"Incredible. You remembered it all."

"As much as it pained me to do so."

Tap tap. This time, she was tapping her temples. So, even though she may not have understood what Yumi was asking, Yoshino-san answered, speaking in broad terms.

"After much effort, I think I understand what you're trying to say Yumi-san, although this is my interpretation."

"In what way?"

"To summarize, Girl A isn't returning home, instead going out night after night with different men. That's what you're saying, right? And all her partners are, without exception, rich and middle-aged."

"That's pretty much it."

Some of them were in their twenties, so calling them all middle-aged was a bit harsh, but what Yoshino-san had said was mostly correct and she'd skillfully compressed it down. Yoshino-san definitely had a knack for putting thoughts into words.

"Frankly, it's assisted dating. Maybe she's even run away from home."

It was blunt, but Yoshino-san's assertion was spoken clearly.

"Assi – "

Yumi's shout was blocked by the palm of Yoshino-san's hand.

They were in the Rose Mansion. Although it was just the two of them at the moment, they never knew when someone was about to come through the biscuit door. They had to take the utmost care with dangerous words that invited misinterpretation.

"Assisted. Dating."

Yumi wrote the words in large print on a scratch pad made from misprinted pages. Of course she'd heard the phrase, but it wasn't something she was personally familiar with.

Perhaps this was what Tsutako-san's colored glasses had indicated. If this was how she had viewed it all along, then her desire to withdraw from the matter was completely understandable.

"Looking at it objectively, it's the only comprehensive explanation."

Yoshino-san was still unaware that it was about Rosa Foetida. To that extent, she was speaking as though it was unrelated to her.

Problem: State the meaning of the following words:

- 1) Assisted
- 2) Dating

Solution.

- 1) With help. Aid.
- 2) Going out. Socializing.

However, when those two words were put together, they had a particular nuance. Yumi sipped her tea. It wasn't a very pleasant phrase.

"You should leave it alone. She'll do whatever she wants anyway. That person herself will be the one who is hurt and regretful afterward."

Yoshino-san was telling her to give up.

"But."

The "person herself" was Rosa Foetida. There was no way she could just leave it alone.

Should she tell Yoshino-san or not. As Yumi was pondering this, the three boutons came shuffling in to the room.

"Brr – it's cold outside."

Rei-sama said, rubbing her hands together.

"One of the teachers called me about some committee matter, that's why I'm late."

Shimako-san explained for Yumi, since they would have left their morning class at about the same time.

"Why do they make someone who never orders from the cafeteria pick up the class lunch orders?"

Sachiko-sama grumbled.

They may not have had the bearing of the current Roses, but the three fresh Roses looked exquisite when lined up together.

"Onee-sama, would you like some tea?"

Yumi hurriedly stood up, completely forgetting that she'd left her memo pad open.

"Assisted dating?"

Sachiko-sama muttered, as she placed her small, split-level lunch-box on the table.

"What an unpleasant phrase."

"Ah, that."

This was bad. Now that the fastidious Sachiko-sama had seen it, would she become obstinately accusatory, or lapse into hysterics ... either way, she wouldn't just let it go.

"I detest those words."

Sachiko-sama said coldly.

"That phrase is probably intended to soften the meaning, but it's not something I can stomach. Although I don't know who would use such words."

"Huh?"

She was primarily concerned about the misuse of words? Apparently her objection was about the phrase rather than the act itself.

But that was just a jab.

"Assisted dating. Dress it up with whatever words you want, in the end it's nothing but prostitution."

Pr-pr-prostitution. That such a word could come from Sachiko-sama's exquisite mouth. Yumi was in such shock that her mouth opened and closed wordlessly.

"Even affair and fling are used similarly nowadays."

"Instead of adultery?"

Rei-sama asked.

"Yes. There's more gravity to the original. But using a lighter phrase doesn't lessen the act itself in any way."

Unaccustomed to this sort of adult conversation, the first-years could only blink in surprise and listen.

(But.)

Right. Sachiko-sama's father had a number of mistresses.

She would certainly have a different impression of those words.

Adultery was serious. Compared to affair or fling. Someone who had been hurt by such behavior would not want it to be spoken about lightly.

But since the far more serious word "prostitution" had been used, there was no way she could broach the topic of Rosa Foetida.

"By the way, what were you doing with this?"

Sachiko-sama asked, holding the memo pad in front of Yumi's face.

"Nothing. I wrote it as a prank while we were chatting."

It was a lame excuse, and Yumi thought as much, but it was all she could do. If asked, "What were you chatting about?" then she'd be struck out.

But Sachiko-sama didn't inquire as to that.

"Really?"

"Yes. Never would I do that sort of thing."

Her mind in chaos, jumbled words spilled out of her mouth.

"Obviously."

Smiling wryly, Sachiko-sama gently flicked Yumi's forehead with her index finger.

As though to say, "Who could possibly think that you would be involved in that?"

Yumi was overjoyed that her onee-sama had that much faith in her, but she also felt a sense of regret growing in her heart.

Was this something that she'd have to hide from her onee-sama too?

But perhaps that kind of conversation wasn't suited to Sachiko-sama after all. Particularly conversations that related to coupling. Sachiko-sama was fastidious to the core, and on top of that she hated men.

(At any rate, what to do?)

Yoshino-san had told her to leave it alone. But if she left it alone, and the school newspaper ran a story about it, it would be a major incident. Right on the eve of graduation, everything surrounding Rosa Foetida would be thrown into turmoil.

But having said that, Yumi wasn't powerful enough to speak directly to the newspaper club. If she tried that, the newspaper club would undoubtedly devour her whole and make a funny article about it.

(Who could I talk it over with?)

Yumi glanced at the other chairs around the table.

(Rei-sama.)

Yumi shook her head, no.

Her direct character would spell disaster, she probably wouldn't be able to keep herself from lunging straight at Rosa Foetida.

(So that means Yoshino-san's out too.)

Whatever she said to Yoshino-san would be transmitted more-or-less directly to Rei-sama. Besides, when she set her mind to something, Yoshino-san rushed recklessly ahead, so in that sense she was probably even more dangerous than Rei-sama. The incident would get blown even further out of proportion.

(Shimako-san.)

Yumi rejected the idea as soon as she thought it. Shimako-san seemed to be reliable, but there was a lot about her that was still a mystery. Yumi couldn't tell how she would handle such a conversation.

(In that case, I suppose it will have to be Rosa Chinensis.)

Out of the entire high-school, she was the one who seemed most adult. But Rosa Foetida was her friend, so it might be a huge shock if Yumi didn't approach it carefully.

"Yumi, are you listening?"

"Ah, yes."

Yumi stood up in a daze, as though she'd just been called to answer a question in class.

"What are you doing?"

Sachiko-sama muttered in shock.

"... Sorry."

No matter how much time passed, she was still the immature younger sister.

"We're discussing the third-years' farewell party. Pay attention."

Sachiko-sama's eyes indicated she should sit down, and Yumi did so despondently. Even so, Sachiko-sama sighed.

"It really is like Rosa Gigantea said. Your expression never stays still."

At that moment, the face of the old lecher / girls-school student floated through her mind.

Part 4.

"Yoohoo."

Rosa Gigantea, Satou Sei-sama, always appeared in front of Yumi with a brightness that seemed to blow away her shadowy past.

"... Gokigenyou."

"Oh, my, when you say it like that you don't sound very perky, Yumi-chan."

"That's not true, but."

She wasn't full of energy, but she wasn't depressed either. She wasn't usually one to engage in deep thinking, so she had to take things at her own pace, not Rosa Gigantea's.

As she walked along the first-floor corridor, she hadn't expected a "Yoohoo" to come rushing up to her from the courtyard. Yoohoo. She wasn't a mountain climber.

"Yumi-chan, are you off to the Rose Mansion?"

"No. Everyone has things to do after school today."

So she'd been heading straight to the entrance, intending to go home.

"Things?"

"Rei-sama has club activities, Shimako-san has a committee meeting and Yoshino-san has her regular doctor's visit."

"Hoho. And Sachiko?"

"She said that that suited her fine, and she'd go home. Things have been busy for her at home recently."

Then Rosa Gigantea said, "Hmm," and struck a thoughtful pose, before slowly hugging Yumi tightly.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"There, there. You were lonely, Yumi-chan. That's why you weren't happy, right? It's okay, just think of me as Sachiko, and act as pampered as you like. I'll sacrifice my body, don't worry. As long as it means hugging your soft frame."

"... You've got it wrong."

A misunderstanding taken to extremes. Sure, she was feeling a bit lonely since her usual after-school tea-party had been suspended because three of the members had other things to do. But that by itself wasn't enough to make her despondent.

If Yumi did appear withdrawn, then it was undoubtedly due to her pondering the question of what to do about Rosa Foetida.

However, Rosa Gigantea continued her misunderstanding.

"You missed me, didn't you Yumi-chan."

"Huh!?"

"Tell me."

"I'll tell you that you're completely wrong."

She squirmed and struggled, then forced herself to take a breather.

Rosa Gigantea's body was warm, and it felt good the way her height and weight seemed to fit Yumi's body perfectly, which made Yumi realize she'd carelessly fallen for Rosa Gigantea's trick. Danger, danger.

"Isn't that odd. It felt like Yumi-chan was calling to me ... "

Rosa Gigantea took a hand off Yumi, using it to scratch the top of her shoulder length hair as she cocked her head in confusion.

"..."

Did Rosa Gigantea have ESP too?

"You didn't call to me? Strange. A massive Yumi-chan wave hit me just before."

"Just before? When?"

"Let's see, about three minutes ago, or thereabouts."

"You must have been imagining things."

Yumi had briefly thought about asking Rosa Gigantea for advice when her name was brought up in conversation. But that was at lunchtime. And only once.

"Then was it you that called to me?"

Rosa Gigantea asked, looking down. There was a blackish stray cat that had arrived unannounced some time earlier. It rubbed up against Rosa Gigantea's leg, meowing softly.

"Lunch!"

"Lunch? This is Goronta."

Rosa Gigantea picked up Lunch, holding her up against her cheek.

"The first-years all call her Lunch. Because she always appears when it's lunch time."

"I see. Now that you mention it, I think Rei's grade calls her Merry-san."

"Lunch" to the first-years.

"Merry-san" to the second-years.

"Goronta" to the third-years.

– Everyone had their own name for her.

"Goronta's a bit of a rude name for a female, though."

She was joking about it now, but Rosa Gigantea was equally guilty since that's what she'd called the cat up until now.

Was the cat aware that it had a number of different names, or not? Lunch purred happily as Rosa Gigantea cuddled her. This was the first time Yumi had seen Lunch be friendly with a person. Even when they'd throw her mouthfuls of sausage from their lunches, she wouldn't come within a metre of anyone to eat.

"You see, this is because she trusts me. That's why she's so friendly."

Rosa Gigantea tickled Lunch's forehead.

"It was last year during the spring, no, early summer. Goronta was just a kitten and she was attacked by crows behind the school building."

"By crows."

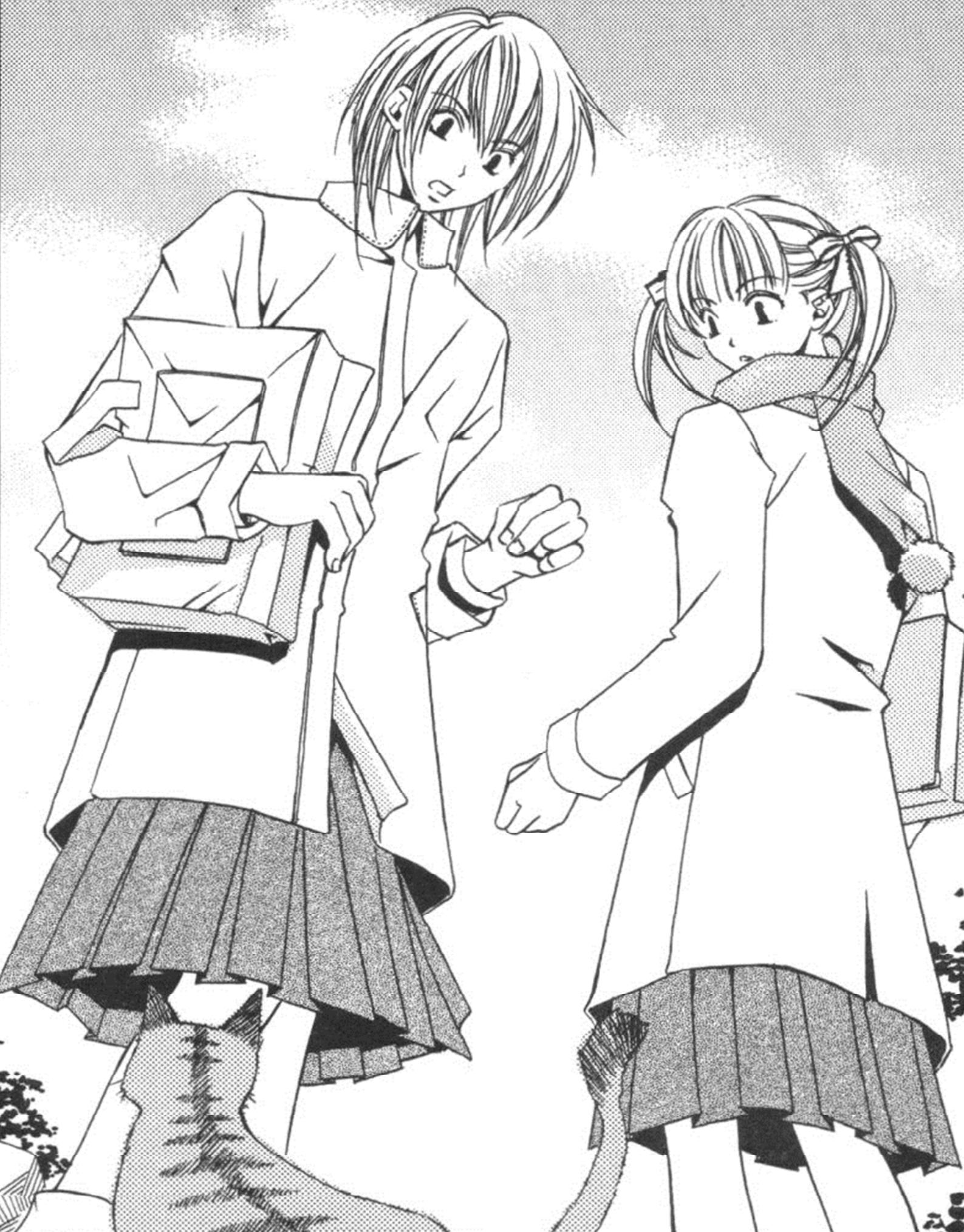
"She was just a kitten, so she was soft and tasty looking. Split amongst the crows, they'd have a decent meal."

"..."

Rosa Gigantea gently rocked the former kitten whose body had obviously grown quite a bit since then.

"I watched a lot of nature documentaries, so I thought that I shouldn't interfere with the laws of the wild."

"Huh, the laws of the wild?"



"Survival of the fittest. The strong carnivores eat the weak herbivores, that sort of thing. That's the way it's been since forever. There's nothing wrong with it per se. So for a human to enter their world and disrupt that system would be against the rules. Because it would change their ecosystem for the worse."

"I kind of understand, but I kind of don't."

"It's the same as how someone who uses a time machine to go back in time mustn't interfere with the past."

"Because they'll change the future."

"Exactly."

"But you helped her, right?"

Yumi asked. Since that was why Lunch was here now.

"Pretty much."

Rosa Gigantea shrugged.

"Why'd I do it? Ask Urashima Tarou, although it probably isn't as good a story."

Once more she was saying incomprehensible things.

"Unlike TV, the reality was right there, I could just reach out and touch it."

In other words, she'd chased away the crows before she had time to think about it.

Rosa Gigantea said she'd searched for the mother cat, but not found her nearby. The kitten had finished weaning, so someone might have decided that Lillian's Girls Academy looked like a good spot and abandoned her there. That kind of thing was fairly common.

It looked like Rosa Gigantea had taken the kitten to the school courtyard and fed it milk. Apparently deciding that it was safer being fussed over by high-school girls than with the crows behind the school buildings. At the very least, the high-school didn't have a **shamisen club**, and there were no rumors of any students habitually eating kittens.

After that, Lunch, or Goronta, or Merry-san, was befriended and raised by the high-school students. Of course, Rosa Gigantea probably cared for her most of all. She probably hid tinned cat food in her school bag when she came to school during the summer and winter vacations.

"But, you know. Shimako, she said that rescuing the cat wasn't kindness but cruelty."

"Shimako-san did?"

"And I did it time and again. Rescuing her, feeding her, showing her kindness. But someday I'd leave this place. Shimako told me to think about what would happen after I graduated. Well, she had a point."

But there were plenty of other students that showed that cat affection too. Indeed, Rosa Gigantea had said so. The many names were proof of that.

"I would have liked to take her home and care for her, but when Goronta, ah, at that time she was just called "cat," when she heard, she said that she'd rather stay at school."

There was lots of greenery, and she had her freedom. There were plenty of small creatures about, so even without scraps from the high-school students she should be able to survive by hunting.

"Cats can talk?"

"This one's special. That's why she remembers me, like a dog."

Rosa Gigantea said, "Right?" as she stroked Lunch's cheeks and set her down on the ground again. Then she put her hand into her pocket, fished out something that looked like a biscuit and set it down in front of Lunch.

"It's dried cat food. If you want, I'll give you one too Yumi-chan."

"No thanks, I'm fine."

Yumi politely declined Rosa Gigantea's offer. Did she really look that greedy?

"And Shimako-san, I think if she saw an injured kitten, she'd save it."

Crunch, crunch. Crunch, crunch. The sound of Lunch happily eating the dried food echoed satisfactorily through the corridor.

"Yeah."

The two humans squatted down to watch the cat eat.

"But unlike this guy, she's a wolf, after all. Being in a new pack is scary."

"A wolf?"

"Yep. She may keep to herself, but I think she really wants to be with friends."

"Why's that?"

"Because wolves are pack animals."

Crunch, crunch. Crunch, crunch.

"... I'm not sure I understand, but I don't know that we're right for her."

"Of course you are. Maybe even the best of all."

In response to Yumi's question, Rosa Gigantea pressed her right index finger and thumb together, making the OK sign.

"You joined the pack relatively easily, Yumi-chan, so you may not understand Shimako's feelings."

"Easily?"

"Yep. Easily."

Yumi's mind whispered, "What about all my worrying?" Her concerns about whether or not she was worthy to be the petit soeur of such a beautiful, smart, and princess-like onee-sama. Even now, she worried about it from time to time.

"I think you might feel inferior about your brains or your looks, but there's a more fundamental question that you don't worry about at all."

"A more fundamental question?"

"When you go about your daily life, are you constantly conscious of the fact that you're a human, or a female?"

"No, not really."

It was an unexpected question, and Yumi put herself on guard. Even if she didn't verify every little thing, she'd established it once, and her personal data wasn't just going to change so easily. She thought it would be normal to forget about it.

"Because you're a Japanese national living in Japan, and a girl attending a girls school. Being conscious of it would be harder."

"Okay."

Even when she met someone for the first time, her self introduction didn't usually include nationality and sex.

"But what if you were thrust into an English boys school?"

"Huh? English?"

"It's just an example. Canadian or French works too."

Rosa Gigantea smiled.

"I guess I'd feel really uncomfortable ... burdened by the knowledge that I was different to all the other students ... on edge."

"That. That's how Shimako is now."

"..."

Of course, Rosa Gigantea wasn't saying that Shimako-san was an English boy. Yumi knew that much. But beyond that, she didn't really understand.

"Returning to our conversation. Basically, Shimako's concerned that she's a wolf, and she can't let a cat into her pack."

"Ahh – "

Yumi instinctively nodded. She didn't understand the fine details, but she knew the broad strokes of what Rosa Gigantea wanted to say.

"Oh? You figured something out?"

"A while ago there was a conversation about being free to go anywhere, at any time, that sort of thing."

"... Really?"

"And you, Rosa Gigantea."

"I?"

"You said that you couldn't save Shimako-san by yourself."

"I see."

"Will we be able to save her?"

"Maybe. I don't know. However."

Rosa Gigantea continued to talk as she patted Lunch.

"I was hurt here at Lillian's, but I was also saved here. Gentle, fragile children gather here, and one way or another, by the time they graduate they all come to love it. That's why I believe. Because it has a healing power that's stronger than they might think, and friends, well, they're a pretty effective medicine too."

Along Lunch's back, there were spots where fur wouldn't grow. They were traces of where the crows had attacked her. The wounds had healed. Even Lunch had probably completely forgotten about the injuries.

Be that as it may.

With all the talk about Lunch and Shimako-san, Yumi had completely forgotten the crucial topic of Rosa Foetida.

Umbrella Maker's Wife

Part 1.

If there's a single white horse mixed in with a pack of chestnut ones, then regrettably it will draw attention to itself.

If there's a single senbei rice cracker in a plate of sweet biscuits, it's only human nature to reach out for that first. Even for those who don't like senbei that much.

So perhaps this was fate.

"—"

Among the group of high-class men, there was a single man of meager means.

(... Bear?)

The bear-man that she ran into at the city zoo said, "Do you want something to eat?" then tore off a chunk of his roasted sweet potato and offered it to Eriko.

"Here."

"It's roasted sweet potato."

With his reply finished, his gaze shifted back to the elephant.

"Umm."

He looked at the elephant as though in a daze, or deep in thought, and even when she called out to the bear-man he didn't turn to look at her.

Eriko reluctantly muttered a thank-you then tasted the sweet potato.

(You mustn't accept things from strange men.)

She'd been told this by her family ever since she was a child, and for the first time in eighteen years Eriko broke this rule.

(You have to be careful because you're so cute Eriko-chan.)

However there hadn't been a single hint of danger from the man with his back to her. He looked like he'd already completely forgotten that he gave half his roasted sweet potato to a female high-school student.

"It's my first time with an impolite man like yourself."

Eriko kicked a pebble towards his feet.

For someone with a weakness for the rare, it was impossible.

Passing the time and pretending not to notice, even though there was an interesting man right there in front of her.

Part 2.

Rosa Foetida was walking.

Staggering alone down the path beside the oval.

It wasn't obvious whether she was just arriving at school or heading home. But she was wearing her school coat and carrying her bag, so it was probably one or the other.

Fourth period was just about to end, so there was no way to tell based on that.

The teacher's whistle blew, signaling an end to the first-year peach group's PE class.

"Thank-you teacher."

The heads adorned with peach colored headbands bowed down, then came back up again. Then they turned towards the school buildings and headed back at a brisk pace.

Although the calendar said it was spring, PE classes at the beginning of March were still austere. Particularly on days like today, when they went long distance running outside.

"I'm going on ahead."

Yumi split off from the rest of her class and ran in the opposite direction.

"Ah, Yumi-san. Where are you going?"

"I've got some things to take care of."

Yumi answered Katsura-san's question without turning around. Probably shocked to see her still running so hard, after the marathon they'd just finished. But Yumi was worried, so she had to do it.

"Rosa Foetida."

After calling out to her, it took about two seconds for her head to raise.

"... Yumi-chan."

"Gokigenyou."

What had she been looking at? Yumi lowered her gaze to where Rosa Foetida had been looking.

The grass on the gently sloping ground that surrounded the oval was curled in on itself due to the cold, and there weren't yet any lively insects or similar.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"Huh ... ?"

"There's nothing I can do, and it's eating at me."

Nothing she can do. Running out of steam at a place like this was bad. At the very least, she should decide whether she was going to class or going home.

"Oh, is this the path you usually take to school?"

"No, it's over there."

Rosa Foetida pointed north expressionlessly. For reference, they were on the oval's western side.

"You're lost then?"

"Something like that."

Yumi didn't know how Rosa Foetida had arrived at that point, but it was unthinkable that a third-year could get lost within the school.

"So then, you're not heading towards school?"

It looked as though Rosa Foetida would continue to wander aimlessly around the area forever if she was left alone.

"I guess."

Her words and behaviors all gave off a feeling of ennui.

"Even if you're going home, it would be quicker to cut across the school and go out through the back gate. Come on, let's go."

Yumi used a bit of force as she pulled Rosa Foetida along. Her body had taken a break from exercising, and the wind sliced through her 100% cotton sweatshirt, chilling her to the bone.

"Hahhh."

As she walked, Rosa Foetida tucked her hair back behind her ears and let out a huge sigh.

"Umm."

At any rate, it was Rosa Foetida that had brought about this feeling. Indeed – Yumi remembered when there had been a similar sensation.

"If there's something wrong with your body, we can go to the school nurse."

"No, it's not a problem with my body – ah."

Rosa Foetida suddenly smiled.

"Yumi-chan, you just remembered what happened with my wisdom teeth, right?"

"Yeah."

That had been during the Yellow Rose Revolution.

"That takes me back. Back then there were suspicions that I was pregnant, it was pretty funny though."

It may not have been that funny at the time, but at the very least it meant they probably wouldn't say that about Rosa Foetida now.

"Sorry for making you worry about me. Let's head to class."

They walked in the entrance and separated to change into their indoor shoes. Yumi peeked into the third-years area and saw Rosa Foetida in her indoor shoes, staring off into space.

"Rosa Foetida?"

"When you think about it, continuing on to university isn't the only path."

In the time it had taken to change from her outdoor shoes into her indoor shoes, it looked as though another thought had highjacked her brain.

Like a scratched CD, the conversation had skipped forward.



"Hah."

For the time being, Yumi offered a non-committal response. At times like this, the only thing she could do was assume the role of the listener.

The wisdom-tooth related suspicions about her pregnancy had been funny, they were going to class, but university wasn't the only path ... it was all incoherent.

"If not university, then ... a job?"

"Ah, there's that option too."

Rosa Foetida nodded slightly, as if she'd only just considered it. Which meant there was something else.

"So the answer is?"

Yumi asked, and the answer came quietly, as though she was speaking to herself.

"I want to get married."

"Huh!?"

Yumi jumped about a foot off the ground.

"But, y-you don't have a partner. That's what you told me before, Rosa Foetida."

After she said this, Yumi thought, "Oh no." Because the faces of the gentlemen pictured in the photographs in her pocket had bubbled up into her mind.

"I may have said that."

Rosa Foetida said as she closed her shoe box.

Yumi almost blurted out, "What now? Do you have a favorite among the guys you're going out with every night?"

"But anyway, marriage, huh."

"Ahh, I want to be the wife of a ronin umbrella maker."

"..."

This was hopeless. Rosa Foetida had a faraway look in her eyes all of a sudden.

Even though they both seemed to be talking in Japanese, they weren't conversing with each other.

Completely baffled, Yumi decided that for the time being she would escort Rosa Foetida to the third-year chrysanthemum classroom. There she would pass the baton to Rosa Foetida's classmates. If Rosa Foetida went home in this state, she might end up in a traffic accident, or worse.

After that she'd head back to the locker room, change clothes, return to her classroom to pick up her lunch, then on to the Rose Mansion.

It was a somewhat dizzying lunch break.

Part 3.

Ronin umbrella maker.

Why that particular phrase?

It was frequently used in period dramas, someone who made their living attaching paper to umbrella frames – was that what she meant by it?

"Hmm..."

Ronin umbrella maker.

Minako typed the phrase into the word processor once more.

She let it stand for now, but wasn't it an antiquated term? By and large, the whole samurai / ronin concept was extinct in the modern age. The term "ronin" still existed, but it was slang to describe someone who failed to get into university, or couldn't find a job after graduation, rather than the traditional meaning of a masterless samurai.

Marriage. Who on earth to?

She fretted, alone, in the club room. Overhearing the conversation between Fukuzawa Yumi and Rosa Foetida in the entrance had been a stroke of luck, but while she had picked up two or three jigsaw puzzle pieces, she still couldn't see the whole picture.

In this kind of situation, usually she would pick up the torch and keep going until the picture appeared. But, recently, even dimwitted Fukuzawa Yumi was on guard –

"Ahh, geeze."

When she first heard about the Rosa Foetida scandal, she didn't think there would be this much interesting material, so she'd jumped at it straight away. But, what of it. Club Members A, B, and C had provided the initial information, but after that she hadn't been able to use it at all.

The problem was that the eyewitness accounts of Rosa Foetida weren't the result of a stakeout or from tailing her, the reality was that the three of them had just accidentally stumbled upon her while they were out.

Someone had said that since it had happened three times, it must have happened more than that, and while she wasn't sure about that, the heavy

crime of the three club members had been in deluding Minako into thinking that if she waited quietly another report would just fall into her lap.

While they had targeted Rosa Foetida, there were limits to what first and second-years could do to follow a third-year, who could come and go as she pleased. Even if it was for the school newspaper, they couldn't just openly ditch class.

The club members had gone out after school in search of gossip, but they'd probably catch nothing today either. While she'd never say it out loud, Minako herself and the first-year club members she used as her arms and legs had half given up.

How many days had it been now? ... One week exactly.

Minako deleted "Ronin Umbrella Maker" from the word processor's display and typed in "Teach Us! OO-sensei."

Speaking of material that could be readily turned into an article, the only thing available was previously shelved notes about a teacher on maternity leave. There was no choice but to once again pad the next week's issue of the "Lillian Kawaraban" with bland material.

(The failure to get Takeshima Tsutako on our side hurts too.)

Spitefully, Minako banged away on the keyboard.

She could write an article for the Lillian Kawaraban just from the three first-years' testimony. But it was as plain as day that it would be a dubious report.

Three members of the newspaper club all coincidentally spotted Rosa Foetida at three different locations. Minako herself would laugh it off as a fabrication.

That was why she'd sought cooperation from the photography club's Takeshima Tsutako. She was certainly proficient with the camera, but it was her ability to sniff out a good photo opportunity that really set her apart. If they took her along, she would undoubtedly catch the scent of Rosa Foetida. Even a single photo would substantially improve their credibility.

(That camera geek.)

Busy after school, every single day. What on earth was she doing?

Thump, thump, thump.

(Her hobby's watching evening baseball matches, and she enjoys a nightcap every single day?)

It was depressing that she had to write such a boring newspaper article. Minako was growing more and more irritated. At the very least, if the story had revolved around the Rose Mansion, then she would have enjoyed typing it more.

Thump, thump ... psheww.

"Ah!"

The monitor emitted a noise then switched off, perhaps protesting her rough treatment. The screen in front of her was as black as the Lillian Kawaraban's future.

"Gah, even the computer's mocking me."

On closer inspection, the power cord had come loose. But head of the newspaper club, Tsukiyama Minako, wasn't the sort of timid person to reflect on whether her own aggressive actions had knocked it out.

"Come take a look, Rose family!"

Alone in the clubroom, she raised a fist.

Looking back on it later, it appeared that something within Minako snapped when the computer lost power.

She couldn't write a newspaper article based on guesses.

But why shouldn't she turn the tables on that rule? People called that line of thought "defiance."

"Now then."

Minako checked the computer cord and powered it on.

It would have been nice to pack up, but she wholeheartedly rejected the evening game and nightcap.

"Muahahaha."

Ominous laughter mixed with the sound of someone tapping on a keyboard could be heard coming from the newspaper club's clubroom.

Part 4.

The following day, the number of photographs increased.

"... I thought you washed your hands of this."

Yumi muttered tiredly, having been beckoned over to the staircase landing just before morning prayers.

"I did. But then a new guy showed up."

Once again, Tsutako-san was gripping a photograph in her hand. She was holding it so that Yumi couldn't see the contents, like she was playing old maid. It was the last card, so that would make it the joker, right? Anyway.

"So what?"

Yumi thought it completely unsurprising that the number of men would increase by one or two.

There were numerous photographs in her pocket. Almost as though they increased whenever she tapped her pocket. The situation was getting desperate.

"This one's a bit different to the others so far. A novelty, so to speak."

Like something out of a police drama, Tsutako-san leaned in close and whispered this in her ear, prompting Yumi to reach out for the photograph.

"Huh?"

A hand appeared from the side and pilfered the photograph, just like that. When they saw who that hand belonged to, both Yumi and Tsutako-san were shocked.

"Ro ... !"

She was so surprised, that the rest of the word didn't come out. Standing there was Rosa Chinensis.

"Ro? Then, robber."

Rosa Chinensis said, playing dumb. So, she wanted to play shiritori, huh?

"Ba, banana."

Still, it was a rather pathetic response. Yumi had unwittingly been drawn into Rosa Chinensis' game.

"Nashi."

That was, obviously, Rosa Chinensis.

"Shi ... silhouette."

"To, Torii Eriko. – She's here, in this photograph."

Rosa Chinensis had started the game of shiritori knowing she could end it like this. Normally it continued until a word ending in 'n'.

"Who's that with her?"

She questioned Yumi, thrusting the photograph right in her face. There was indeed someone different to the others, and if Yumi were choosing her words carefully, she would describe him as a simply dressed middle-aged man. The photo's background looked like it was somewhere in a zoo.

"Mmm, who knows?"

Naturally, Yumi didn't know who this bearded, bear-like man was.

"Don't give me that. Spit it out."

But even if she was interrogated, Yumi honestly didn't know, so there was nothing she could do. Even if she were threatened or tortured to the point where she wanted to spit it out, she couldn't.

"I see. It seems you're telling the truth."

Suddenly changing tack, Rosa Chinensis asked:

"Did you take this, Tsutako-san?"

Smiling cheerfully as she grabbed Tsutako-san's sailor collar, foiling her attempt to sneak away.

"Go-gokigenyou. I'm in awe of your exquisite countenance – "

As expected, even Tsutako-san couldn't resist the power of Rosa Chinensis' beauty at close range. Perhaps due to confusion, the words that came spilling out sounded like something from a period drama.

"Tsutako-san. It's not good to hide things."

Scary. All the more so because she was smiling.

"I simply happened to spot Rosa Foetida by chance. Even if you ask me who she was with ... "

Tsutako-san recoiled.

"Well, that's fine. Since you said "this one," that must mean that there are other photos. Hand over the rest of them."

Rosa Chinensis held out her hand to accept them. An authoritative request that was impossible to deny.

"No, I don't have any ... "

Tsutako-san trembled as she shook her heads and waved her hands in denial. She wasn't lying. She didn't have any other photographs on her. Holding them was –

(Amen.)

With her hand still in her pocket, Yumi looked up at the heavens.

As though she had eyes in the back of her head, Rosa Chinensis turned to Yumi once more.

"Yumi-chan. Show me what's in your pocket."

"Huh?"

"Come on, out with it."

Having been ordered to do so, how could she resist? Rosa Chinensis wasn't some kindly old grandmother. There was no way Yumi could match wits with someone who held Sachiko-sama in the palm of her hands.

Reluctantly Yumi took the photos that were the crystallization of Miss Takeshima Tsutako's hard work out of her pocket and placed them in Rosa Chinensis' hand. Despite their two versus one numerical advantage, it had been a complete rout of the first-years.

"I see."

Rosa Chinensis muttered as she scrutinized each of the photos.

"Nice find"

"Huh?"

"Novelty. It's Eriko's weakness."

Rosa Chinensis spoke frankly about her friend's shortcomings.

"She has a weakness ... for novelty."

Yumi and Tsutako-san looked at each other.

"Right, novelty. Two years ago, Eriko had her pick of all the first-years, and she chose a masculine, tall and skinny girl. Despite the fact that there were numerous cute girls vying to be her petit soeur. Now, why do you think she did that?"

"Because she has a weakness for novelty?"

"Exactly. She couldn't find a first-year that interested her more than Rei."

So Rosa Foetida's sole consideration when choosing a petit soeur was how enjoyable they would make her school life?

"So you see, the only box that needs to be checked is the one that says they're a type of person she hasn't encountered before."

Rosa Gigantea had said something similar a while ago. That Rosa Foetida found life dull because she had neither strengths nor weaknesses. So when presented with a choice, she would pick the unexpected.

"If it was just these rich men, left alone it would take care of itself."

Rosa Chinensis seemed to be talking to herself as she looked at the photographs.

"This out-of-place man is the only troubling one."

She seemed to be giving serious thought as to what type of man he was. Apparently Rosa Chinensis was completely unconcerned about the rest of them.

"With Eriko, below a certain interest threshold she's able to make very calculated decisions. But once her interest rises above that level, she'll lose sight of her surroundings, which can be dangerous. It's fine as long as she doesn't get into trouble, though."

So the rich men were unable to move the needle on Rosa Foetida's interest gauge. Was that what Rosa Chinensis meant? Yumi had thought it would have been the opposite, that the rich men would have been more troubling.

Still, this showed the caliber of Rosa Chinensis. Even when shown photographs of her dear friend on dates with various men, she wasn't even slightly flustered.

"You must really trust her."

Sachiko-sama's detested phrase apparently hadn't occurred to Rosa Chinensis. Maybe that's what happened with close friends. Yumi felt like she still had a long way to go to have that kind of remarkable relationship, because she doubted if she would have the same level of trust in Yoshino-san or Shimako-san if they were involved in the same situation as Rosa Foetida. Rosa Chinensis hadn't needed a reason. She had full and unconditional faith in her friend.

However, Rosa Chinensis scoffed at Yumi's words.

"It's not trust."

"Huh?"

So blunt.

"That's not to say I don't trust her. But I'm really worried. Because, when I saw her yesterday, she'd turned back into apathetic Eriko."

It was almost like Rosa Chinensis was saying that she wasn't worthy of the title Rosa Foetida. But Yumi was still optimistic, because she could sense the affection between them.

"Apathetic?"

Tsutako-san asked, her interest growing.

The stress seemed to be abating from Rosa Chinensis, enough so that she could finally laugh.

"Remember how she was during the Yellow Rose Revolution? It's barely been six months and again she's becoming equally useless. What could make her behave like that?"

What could make her behave like that? None of them could find an answer to that question.

The bell rang.

Rosa Chinensis said, "See you later," and started walking down the stairs towards her classroom. She stopped halfway, apparently remembering, turned around and handed the bundle of photographs to Yumi.

"Her sickness this time is a bit more serious than an ear infection or impacted wisdom tooth. I don't think it will be cured anytime soon."

"But Rosa Foetida said there wasn't anything wrong with her body."

She had definitely said this when Yumi found her near the oval.

"Yumi-chan, sickness doesn't just refer to a problem with the body."

"Rosa Foetida ... has a mental illness?"

Rosa Chinensis started with, "I wouldn't say that," then leaned over and whispered in Yumi's ear, before gliding away down the stairs.

Yumi played back the words that Rosa Chinensis left her with.

"Have I seen love ... ?"

Two disparate points were joined together by a very delicate line.

Golden Rose Uproar

Part 1.

The newspaper club did it again.

What, you ask?

The latest edition of the old reliable "Lillian Kawaraban" was completely filled with a short story by Tsukiyama Minako-sama. The main character's name had been changed slightly, but it was obviously based on Rosa Foetida.

The title was "The Golden Rose," and that's just a Yellow Rose by any other name.

It was absurd enough to make a born-and-raised Tokyoite start quoting Shakespeare.

And it was about "Tory Eniko." Anyone just glancing at the article would read it as Torii Eriko. The disclaimer that it was a "short story" and "fiction", probably a defense against libel claims, was very inconspicuous. Nobody would ever notice it unless it was brought to their attention.

Yumi remembered the words that Rosa Gigantea had spoken during the Yellow Rose Revolution.

– Tsukiyama Minako was better suited to being a novelist than an editor.

That may indeed be true. It wasn't clear how much she knew, but since it had the "short story" disclaimer, there had to be some part of it that was pure speculation. According to Tsutako-san, the newspaper club hadn't received any additional reports. Naturally, they hadn't been given any photos either.

"What's with this artist's impression photograph?"

For the first time in a while, Sachiko-sama vented her anger directly.

"It's probably meant to imitate the scene recreations they do on talk shows. It's fine, sit down Sachiko."

Rosa Chinensis quietly ordered as she sipped her tea.

"Like how they'll show a fake replay streaming in the background when reporting on juvenile crime."

That was Rosa Gigantea. Chiming in as she sat with both arms and legs crossed.

"They do it when broadcasting pictures of the perpetrator or their school is inappropriate. So instead they'll show official documents, or an artist's impression, or the silhouette of an actor unrelated to the matter. Shot from behind or otherwise blurred."

Yoshino-san, an avid watcher of talk shows when she was in hospital, joined in to explain the artist's impression concept. Rei-sama, Shimako-san and even Yumi all nodded, saying, "I see." That left Sachiko-sama on her own.

"That's not what I'd call this."

She thumped the table as she spoke. On it were the copies of the latest edition of the "Lillian Kawaraban" that each of them had brought, making seven in total.

"Look, the photo's taken from behind, but no matter how you look at it, it's Minako-san. You can see her bangs pushed up by the hairband. It all seems very makeshift. However, she's made a huge mistake if she thinks it will fool any of the readers into thinking that that's Rosa Foetida."

"..."

Yumi instinctively looked down. Embarrassingly, not only hadn't she realized that it was Minako-sama, but she'd actually thought that it was Rosa Foetida. So, of the people that had the current edition of the "Lillian Kawaraban," about half of them would probably fall for the optical illusion. After all, even Yumi hadn't been able to see through it.

At any rate, for the first time in a while, the third-years had joined them in the Rose Mansion. After getting a copy of the "Lillian Kawaraban," they had spontaneously assembled after school.

The focal point, Rosa Foetida, was absent.

Yumi had peeked inside her shoe box a little earlier and determined that, at they very least, Rosa Foetida wasn't in the school building.

"It was thoughtless of me."

Rosa Chinensis muttered as she looked up at the ceiling.

"I never imagined the newspaper club would move like this."

At this, Sachiko-sama raised her eyes once more and said:

"Onee-sama, you knew of this!?"

"Somewhat. Just that she was going out on dates with different men every night."

A scratching, scrunching sound came from somewhere. Yumi had thought it was someone grinding their teeth, but it turned out to be Sachiko-sama wringing her handkerchief.

(This is bad ...)

Come on, Sachiko-sama. Get your anger under control.

(Now then, this is a pickle.)

That it was the build up to an explosion made it all the more scary.

"If you knew about this, why didn't you do something?"

Scrunch, scrunch, scrunch.

"I thought I'd wait and see what happened. I didn't want to cause a disturbance. If I'd flown off the handle, like you just did Sachiko, it would have complicated the situation."

Had she noticed the scraping or not? Rosa Chinensis seemed to be deliberately choosing words that would provoke Sachiko-sama.

"Yeah, good point."

Fanning the flames, Rosa Gigantea recklessly agreed.

Scrunch, scrunch.

"Pardon me, I too ... uh"

Unable to endure a moment longer, Yumi raised her hand. A voluntary admission. There was a ticking time-bomb sitting right in front of her that Yumi couldn't defuse, and she couldn't just sit there and wait for it to go off. In that case, she might as well move the hand of the clock forward herself.

"Even you – "

The focus of her anger had shifted. Sachiko-sama's face looked demonic, like a Hannya mask.

"I'm sorry, onee-sama. I thought about discussing it with you, but you're ... "

"I'm what?"

"How can I put this, it felt like it would be an unpleasant topic with you, men and women, their relationships, that sort of thing."

Scrunch, scrunch ... rip.

"Unpleasant? Unpleasant you say?"

Sachiko-sama's white handkerchief had finally given way, and she hurled it down onto the table.

"Why can't you see that hearing out about it afterward like this is hundreds of times more unpleasant!"

"Hya"

Finally, the explosion. Yumi was at her wits' end, but the two third-years were making snide comments, like, "Ah, there she goes."

"So, what? Because I can't stand men, you hid this from me?"

Sachiko-sama picked up her discarded handkerchief and started wringing it again. Yumi had no excuse for her own actions, but there was one thing she could say clearly. That handkerchief had done nothing wrong.

"All of you, you're mocking me – "

Yumi was about to say that it wasn't like that when Shimako-san raised her hand and said:

"I didn't know anything about this, though."

Then Yoshino-san jumped in with, "Me neither."

"So Yumi-san's vague, rambling talk about assisted dating, that was about Rosa Foetida?"

"Assisted dating? Stop already."

Rei-sama was shivering.

"Well, just from reading "The Golden Rose," those sort of suspicions are inevitable."

Rosa Gigantea seemed to be reveling in the current situation, although it was hard to tell whether those were her true feelings or a facade.

"Hmm."

In the end, Sachiko-sama was cheered up by seeing that the knowledge had only spread to those in the Red Rose family, thus limiting the damage. Being the only one not to know would have been an unforgivable affront to her pride.

"Setting that aside, if this story really is modeled after my onnee-sama – "

Rei-sama hung her head in shame, looking like she was about to cry. With that, the mood turned somber. In many ways, the shock was probably greatest for Rosa Foetida's petit soeur, Rei-sama.

"Don't worry, it's labeled fiction, so most of it's pure speculation."

Rosa Chinensis reached across the table and patted Rei-sama on the shoulder.

"But you don't know that for sure."

Like she was praying to the statue of Maria-sama, Rei-sama clung on to Rosa Chinensis.

"Of course I do. I can point out the many mistakes in "The Golden Rose.""

Her chest puffed out with pride, Rosa Chinensis was always reliable.

With that, everyone's gaze turned back to the pages of the "Lillian Kawarban."

Synopsis of "The Golden Rose"

Approaching her graduation from high-school, the "Golden Rose," Tory Eniko, felt a hole in her heart. To supplement her study of society, she took a part-time job at a Date Club. All her partners were adults, and they introduced Eniko to a world she'd never known.

Baseball player A took her on an all-night road trip. Surgeon B took her to an art gallery, while Model C took her to an exclusive, hidden restaurant.

But as she changed men every night just like she changed clothes, Eniko started to feel hollow.

Then who should appear but a new teacher at Eniko's school, who had only recently graduated from college, Teacher D. He found Eniko aimlessly wandering the streets at night, and gently admonished her to return home. Hearing his words, Eniko's eyes were opened and she returned to her former life, realizing that what she had been searching for was Teacher D all along.

Eniko decided to propose to Teacher D on the day of her graduation ...

" – Well, that's the short version anyway. It's a pretty weak story. But if you read it thinking it's modeled on someone you know, you can't put it down."

Rosa Chinensis laughed sarcastically.

"So which part of it's wrong then? Don't stop there, please tell us."

Sachiko-sama looked sullen as she urged Rosa Chinensis to continue.

"Oh, calm down. Yumi-chan, do you still have those things from before in your pocket?"

"Ah."

Things from before that were still in her pocket? Well, of course there was her handkerchief ... but obviously that's not what she meant.

"Hand them over."

" ... Here."

Yumi obediently handed over "those things from before," the photographs. Rosa Chinensis took them and spread them out over the table.

"These photos were all taken by one of Yumi-chan's classmates, Takeshima Tsutako-san."

"Way to go, Camera-chan."

Rosa Gigantea whistled.

"Sei, quit fooling around."

"... Sorry, continue."

Rosa Chinensis joined her hands together in a display of forbearance and continued.

"There's five men pictured here, right? Based on their appearance, if we were to name them – "

Rosa Chinensis lined up the photos A, B and C. Interestingly, they matched the description of the characters from "The Golden Rose" exactly.

"So, Teacher D is?"

What was left over was a balding, overweight, middle-aged man and the bear-man.

"At the very least, neither of them are teachers at our school. Nor do they look like they've recently graduated from college."

Everyone agreed, "That's true."

"So, what that means is ... "

"The second half's completely made up."

"Then the first half is true?"

Once more, Rei-sama looked like she was about to cry.

"No, it's mostly speculation. By the way, Rosa Gigantea."

Rosa Chinensis set the photo with the bear-man to one side before asking.

"Have a look at these four photos, do you notice anything?"

"These four ... ah."

"Right?"

"I see."

Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Gigantea's eyes met and they nodded. And then.

"Third-year chrysanthemum class, Torii Eriko-san please report to the educational guidance room immediately."

Could be heard coming through the school PA system, after the cheery intro music.

"I repeat, third-year chrysanthemum – "

Was this a repeat of the "Forest of Thorns?" This time around Rosa Foetida was being summoned to the educational guidance room.

"No way. Don't tell me the guidance teacher took this story for the truth?"

"That can't be."

Hahaha.

Nervous laughter echoed around the Rose Mansion.

But nobody there thought it was completely unrelated.

"What should we do?"

"We have to make an appearance, right?"

The seven young girls, none of whom were called Torii Eriko, stood up simultaneously. Just like the seven samurai.

"Yumi. Don't forget the photographs."

Sachiko-sama said on the way out the door, and Yumi nodded and gave her a thumbs-up.

Reading you loud and clear.

Part 2.

Outside the educational guidance room, Tsukiyama Minako had turned into a ninja.

"President. About the current situation."

A voice called to her from behind.

"It's brilliant. No, it's even better than that."

She answered without turning around, her ear against the wall even though she couldn't hear anything inside. There was always a shortcut to finding out anything. With that in mind, she'd half expected her ninja-like hearing to work. Of course, she knew that the room was soundproof.

"Even better?"

"Four men involved in the matter have shown up. I wonder if they were called as witnesses."

Minako explained, still maintaining her ninja persona.

She'd first caught sight of the rumored group of men when they adjourned from the staff room to the educational guidance room. As soon as she caught a glimpse of them, Minako instinctively raised her fist to the heavens. They were all there, like they'd just stepped out of the pages of her short story. – It was perfect.

"Four men, you mean A, B, C and D, right?"

"Probably not D."

Right. The sole flaw was that there was one man who hadn't been described in the story. But he could always make an appearance as another customer of Eriko's, or rather Eniko's, in the sequel to "The Golden Rose."

"Why wouldn't D be there?"

The voice asked, right beside her ear.

"You know."

That was as far as Minako got in her explanation before she felt a chill run down her spine. Unnoticed, she had been surrounded by an uncomfortable atmosphere.

"That's ... "

Timidly, she turned around.

"That's because D's someone you made up for your story, right Minako-san?"

"Ulp."

It was enough to make her scream. Lying in wait, right next to her, was Rosa Chinensis. Minako's extreme focus had backfired, as she hadn't been able to tell that the voice didn't belong to a club member.

"How do you intend to make amends for this disturbance?"

"Make amends, what ever do you mean? Please, don't look so angry, Rosa Chinensis. I simply – "

As she made her excuses, Minako searched for a way out, but she'd already been completely surrounded by the Rose families. There was nothing more she could do.

"You simply published a short story, is that what you were going to say? Surely you can't believe that that's the end of it?"

"That's all there is."

"In your story, "The Golden Rose," the protagonist has a part-time job at a date club, right?"

"Ah, ... yeah."

"Although I suppose it is of minimal concern to your so-called school newspaper, I applaud your decision not to depict it as an 18+ venture."

"Ah, I thought self-restraint was warranted for the time being."

In truth, that was how Minako had initially written it, but she hadn't wanted to open up another avenue for Rosa Foetida to complain, so she'd abandoned it. The way she wrote a short story with all those restrictions, it was like she was a professional writer. It had been a bit exciting.

"But."

Rosa Chinensis caught her eye before continuing.

"You may think that all you've done is provide your readers with a humorous story, but you should realize that the end result of your

misleading representation would be a grave insult to the honor of a certain individual."

"Uh."

Thump.

"The date club clearly had sexual overtones. Nor can you claim to be unaware that students have dropped out of school immediately after being called to the educational guidance room."

The quickening thump of Minako's heartbeat wasn't because Rosa Chinensis had grabbed her shoulder. It was because she was only now realizing how scandalous an act she had committed.

Certainly, she'd written the humorous story to enliven the "Lillian Kawaraban." But that didn't mean that Rosa Foetida wouldn't resent it. Especially if it caused her to drop out of school.

"What should I do?"

All the strength had left her body. Just as it looked as though she was about to fall to her knees, Rosa Gigantea propped her up, saying, "Get it together."

"Announce to the entire school that Torii Eriko is completely unrelated to "The Golden Rose," and, if necessary, publicly apologize to those concerned."

Minako received the harsh pronouncement of Rosa Chinensis.

"But, if all of it is fiction ... "

Say Minako testified that it was all fiction, but the school kept investigating and, little by little, it came out that something like what she'd written in the short story had taken place –

"It's fiction. If not, there's a crucial mistake with your data."

"A mistake with my data?"

Those words were unforgivable. Minako was about to argue, but Rosa Chinensis snapped her fingers.

"Perfect. Let's go inside."

All present entered the educational guidance room.

Naturally, they knocked first.

Part 3.

Knock knock.

Rosa Chinensis knocked on the door to the educational guidance room.

After about ten seconds, the door was opened from inside.

"Oh my. What kind of disturbance were you girls involved in?"

The sister in charge of student guidance asked, her eyes wide with surprise.

"There's something we have to say in relation to the Torii Eriko-san matter."

Normally, students wouldn't involve themselves unnecessarily, but Rosa Chinensis had marched to the educational guidance room, head held high, and did what had to be done. Yumi watched on with admiration from her position near the back of the line.

"Something you have to say?"

"In short, a defense. We've brought a witness along too."

"A witness?"

The sister looked momentarily puzzled, but then Rosa Gigantea gave the "witness" a pat on the back, forcing her forwards.

"I-I'm Tsukiyama Minako."

Not having had time to prepare herself, Minako-sama was still flustered when she introduced herself.

"Tsukiyama Minako-san ... ah, the head of the newspaper club. I was just thinking about summoning you."

She was beckoned inside. At that point, Rosa Chinensis inquired, "Is it alright if we accompany her?"

"Who do you mean by "we"?"

The sister looked over the entire group assembled outside the educational guidance room then asked:

"Surely you don't mean everyone?"

"Yes."

Rosa Chinensis replied, a serious look on her face.

"That's quite a lot of people."

One, two, three, four ... all up there were six students arranged behind Rosa Chinensis.

"Please. We're all friends."

If it had just been the two Roses, they may have been allowed to enter easily. But Rosa Chinensis was not compromising. Yumi and the others watched on in fascination, relying completely on Rosa Chinensis.

"Wait here for a moment."

As the sister was about to withdraw from the entrance momentarily, to consult with the teachers inside, Rosa Chinensis drew alongside Minako-sama and grabbed her hand. The sister smiled wryly when she saw this, as she hadn't intended to use that opportunity to take Minako-sama along with her.

"You're a sneaky one."

Rosa Gigantea whispered into Rosa Chinensis' ear.

"So there's a fool here who would surrender their trump card and get turned away at the door, then?"

"Nobody said that."

Hohoho. The two Roses traded sly laughs, like conniving courtiers from a historical drama. It didn't really matter either way, but they were laying it on a bit thick.

"Alright. Come inside, all of you."

The sister returned, her discussion finished, and opened the door wide.

"However, you are not to speak unless asked to directly. Understood?"

The conniving courtiers, their subordinates, and everyone else responded like good girls, saying, "Yes ma'am."

"Pardon me."

As they all filed in one-by-one, the first thing they did was confirm who was actually in the room. Yumi stood next to Yoshino-san, and her eyes sparkled as she surveyed the line-up.

The educational guidance room wasn't as small as the club rooms, but it certainly wasn't spacious either.

The first thing that caught her eye was the school principal and the third-year chrysanthemum class home room teacher seated next to each other on a sofa. Seated facing them was an unknown middle-aged man and Rosa Foetida. Three younger men stood, perhaps due to lack of chairs, behind the sofa.

"Eriko, you were at school?"

Rosa Gigantea called out, forgetting her promise to not speak unless spoken to.

"Yeah, and didn't that turn into a royal pain."

Rosa Foetida wasn't in her own world today, but she was sulking.

"I was on my way home, and had made it to the back gate when that announcement was made. Thanks to this lot, I had to head back to the main building."

She angled her chin at the four men when she said, "this lot."

As she looked at the faces in turn, Yumi was surprised. Until now, they had all been resting in the photographs in the pocket of her school uniform.

The well-built man that had been sitting in a deck-chair by the hotel pool.

The serious looking man who had been escorting Rosa Foetida to the platinum seating area of a concert hall.

The tall, slender man who had been picking out matching high-class suits with Rosa Foetida.

Identifying them just by their physique and facial expression probably wouldn't offend anyone. And, in that regard, they matched the descriptions of A, B, and C from "The Golden Rose."

"The four of them stormed into the staff room and started causing an uproar. Unacceptable."

When Rosa Foetida shrugged her shoulders, the man beside her trembled. He was neither A, B, nor C. He was the middle-aged man from the high-class Japanese restaurant.

"Unacceptable? That's what your behavior was."

He shot up, his patience apparently reaching its limit. – Then, Rosa Chinensis, who was standing right there, held out her right hand and said:

"It's been a while, sir."

(Huh?)

"You look like you've had a rough day today."

Rosa Gigantea added, and "sir" smiled, nodding slightly.

"Ohh, Youko-chan and Sei-kun."

(Huhhh?)

Yumi's mind was reeling. Apparently Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Gigantea both knew this man too.

"I'm a mess, I know. I was in the middle of a meeting at the shopping center when the call came, so I didn't have time to change into something better."

Loose knit sweater and jeans. The jacket he was wearing over the top with the "OO Shopping Center" logo looked a bit more stylish.

"And the boys?"

"What could I do? I was at work when dad called, saying, "Eriko-chan's in trouble.""

A was wearing a gridiron uniform, not a baseball one.

"Same here."

B was wearing a white coat, like a surgeon or something ... tough break, Minako-sama.

"Same."

C looked like he'd come straight from a photo-shoot, still wearing expensive clothes and grumbling, "I wonder if they'll charge me for these." On closer inspection, Yumi recalled having seen him in a TV drama.

" – so there they are, Eriko's father and brothers."

Rosa Chinensis introduced them.

"Huh!?"

Minako-sama, Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama, Shimako-san, Yoshino-san and Yumi, six people in total, all cried out in surprise. Her father and brothers. So even if she had been going out on what looked like dates with them, they were family, so there was no problem at all. Quite the contrary, in fact, she was out having fun with a chaperone – .

"See, I told you there'd be a misunderstanding. All you guys, with no family resemblance, vying for my attention. And on top of that, you joined in too, dad. This family, it's something else."

Rosa Foetida said, fed up, and her father and three older brothers all protested immediately.

"Why are you saying such harsh words, Eriko-chan?"

Rosa Foetida's father said, then A, the oldest brother chimed in too.

"You never used to be such a cold child."

Lamenting.

"You're our family's idol."

"Don't snuff out the flame in our hearts."

Next was B, the middle brother, followed by C the youngest, all adding their bit.

Their appearances were all different, but they all seemed to share a weakness for Rosa Foetida. Almost lovestruck even.

Watching on, Yumi thought that it was indeed "something else." To prepare such gorgeous dates for your daughter or younger sister wasn't really something that the average family would do.

"Basically, it's like this."

Rosa Foetida's explanation was as follows:

Eighteen years ago, a single daughter was born into the Torii family. Coming after three boys, the long-awaited daughter was well cared for. There was an age gap between the boys and her, so when her brothers got jobs and found themselves with money to spare, they bought her things she

wanted as gifts, and took her to interesting places. Initially everyone was fine with this, but then the brothers started monopolizing her time with their invitations. Probably trying to outdo each other, the money flowed like water.

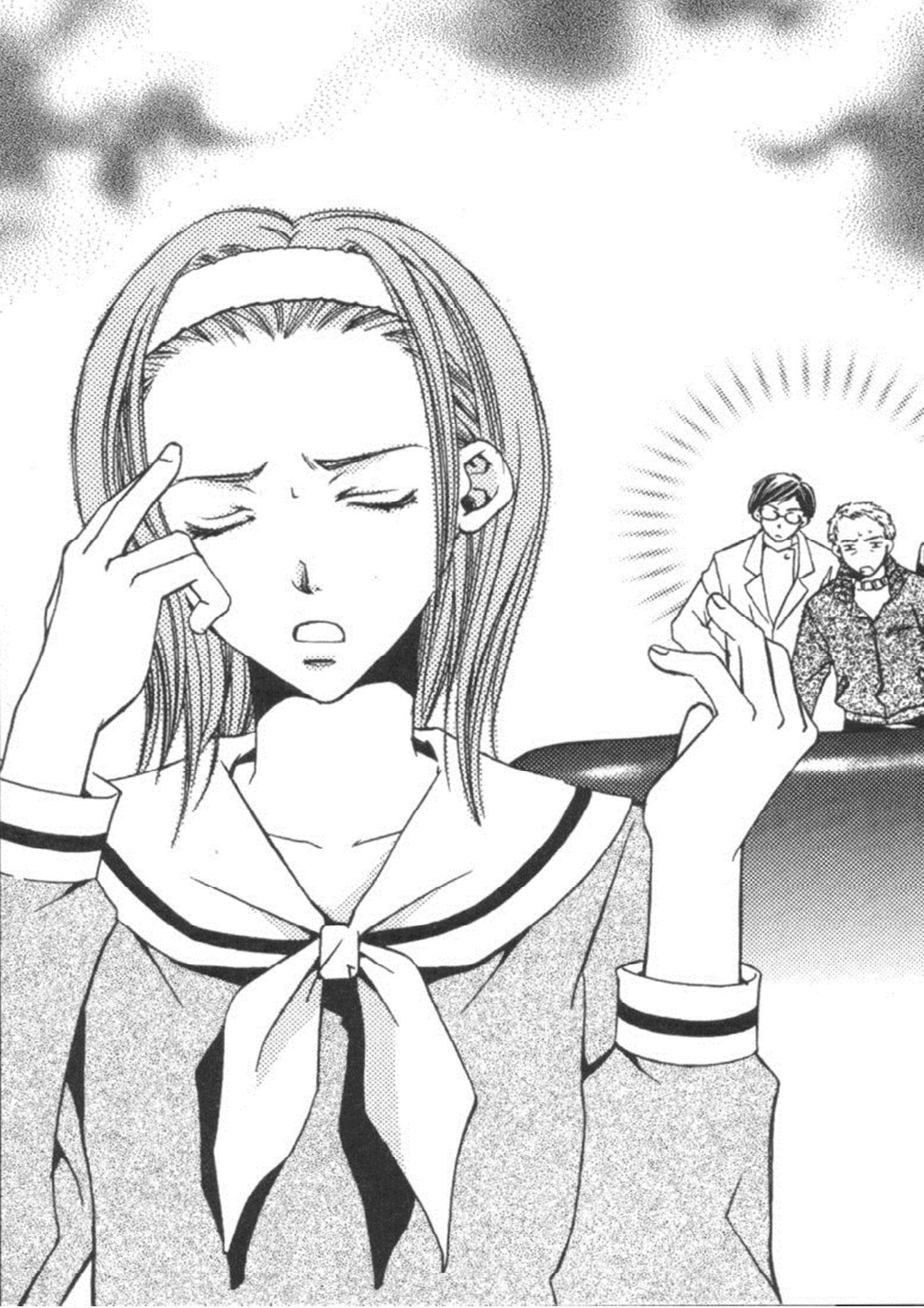
"Then one day, mom couldn't watch it anymore and she let fly."

A monthly limit was set on the amount of money they could spend, and the amount of time they could spend with their little sister. In order to return a degree of normalcy to Eriko-chan's life.

"Since the beginning of winter, I'd been using my exams as an excuse to turn down all their invitations. But ever since the results were published, I've had the overcrowded schedule of a pop idol."

Her brothers had been saving up their time and money. And then her father joined in too –

"My mom lied to Yumi-chan because she was too embarrassed to tell the truth. That the grown-up men of the family were going out on dates with her daughter. Even going so far as to get her a hotel room, in order to monopolize her time. Because of that, every day I've been showing up at school sleep deprived."



"But, I just wanted to watch videos with you without anyone interrupting."

"What's wrong with wanting to see the best night skyline from a high floor with your younger sister?"

"If I'd thought you'd have enjoyed a late night drive, I would have taken you back home."

"An all-night monopoly ... "

They were all saying pretty much the same thing. The four men of the Torii family were all squirming.

"My brothers are all such sis-cons that they can't get girlfriends either."

Rosa Foetida said, cutting right through them.

Sis-con. The abbreviation of sister complex. Basically, in love with their sister.

"What a horrible thing to say."

"Even though it's the older brother's duty to protect his younger sister until she gets married."

"No, not just until she's married, we always have to get along well as a family."

The brothers had reached the point where they were trying to use tears to get their way.

"I think that's quite enough."

The school principal intervened in the conversation. Probably deciding that this family feud / pseudo-lovers quarrel wasn't going to be resolved any time soon.

"There had been various reports made to the school that Eriko-san was out on the town at night with various men. But we realized they were all members of her family, so we were not intending to make a fuss about it. Naturally, we regret the manner in which this rumor was spread by the school newspaper. Perhaps we have not been as scrupulous in our guidance as we should have."

At the mention of the school newspaper, the head of the newspaper club, Minako-sama, bowed her head and said, "My deepest apologies."

"As you can see, the newspaper club recognizes this too."

The school principal said, leaving implied the question, "Is there a problem?" So apparently the school hadn't summoned them here, instead the Torii males had proactively invaded.

"So then, principal, are you saying that everything in this newspaper is a lie? While they've obviously made a huge mistake in claiming that we're date club customers, they have captured the finer details of our physical appearances."

Father Torii placed the paper, crumpled from being grasped tightly, on the table and tapped it. Looking closely, it was the latest edition of the "Lillian Kawaraban," published that day. No. On even closer inspection, it was actually a copy, or a fax, of the paper, and not the real thing.

"At the very least, I'm sure the second half is all fiction. There's nobody like Teacher D employed at this school."

Hearing the words of the school principal, Minako-sama nodded furiously. It looked like it had all become too much for her, and she was lost for words.

"You're not all just trying to protect him, are you?"

Rosa Foetida's father looked searchingly at all the teachers and students assembled there. Brave of him to capture those who dwelt in Maria-sama's garden, as Lillian's Girls Academy was also known, and accuse them of being liars. Especially since there were two nuns in that very room.

"They're not about to start lying to the vice-president of the PTA."

Rosa Chinensis said, smiling, after raising her hand.

"If you have any doubts, you could take a look in the high-school and middle-school staff rooms. The elementary school and kindergarten are a bit further afield, but if you so desire, I could guide the way."

Rosa Gigantea added, her hand raised as well. Her pose saying, "I know you didn't ask me, but it's better that I spoke up." Was she honestly trying to

abide by the instructions that the sister had given them when they entered the room, that they should only speak when asked to directly? No, earlier she'd spoken up on her own.

"Mm..."

Rosa Foetida's father faltered. He could have dug his heels in and said, "Lead on," but that wasn't an easy option to take. Even if he wanted to, visiting all the staff rooms in the entire school would be quite a task.

"Like I said, there is no such person."

"But, Eriko."

"While she may work in the school office, dad's cousin's daughter, one of your distant cousins, still thought it best to intervene and send the fax."

(Huh? The school office?)

It was true. Taking a closer look at the paper from earlier, the words, "Lillian's Girls Academy – Office," appeared in small print at the bottom of the page.

"So there's no truth to what's written here, then?"

"Truth? Of what?"

"Ahh ... umm ... well. Tell me that you're not in love with anyone."

Mumble, mumble. It was a topic that Rosa Foetida's father seemed uncomfortable talking about. Looking at it from the daughter's point of view, Yumi thought it was something she wouldn't want to be asked either, but that didn't stop her from listening in. In a way, it was equivalent to replacing the male relatives.

"I am."

Rosa Foetida announced clearly, wiping away her father's earlier inarticulateness.

"In love with someone."

"Huh?"

Rang out, but it wasn't from Rosa Foetida's father. Nor her brothers. It came from the students, all except Rosa Chinensis, Yumi and Minako-sama.

The males of the Torii family were unable to respond to such a shocking declaration, and appeared to be on the verge of fainting. The teachers were – alas, Yumi didn't have enough time to complete her observation.

"Wh-who is it?"

Rei-sama asked Rosa Foetida, not raising her hand for permission to speak.

The "Ronin Umbrella Maker" floated into Yumi's mind. The person that Rosa Foetida wanted to marry. If she was in love, it could only be with him.

"Yumi-chan, let me borrow those photos."

Quick as a flash, Rosa Gigantea had thrust her hand into the pocket of Yumi's skirt.

"Wah"

"Sor-ry!"

Rosa Gigantea pulled out the entire bundle, and thumbed through the photos one-by-one until she found the one she was looking for, then held it in front of Rosa Foetida's face.

"Him?"

It was the photograph that Yumi had expected. The one at a zoo, with Rosa Foetida looking at a bear of a man eating a roasted sweet potato.

"Oh my. This is a really good photo. May I have it?"

Rosa Foetida asked, looking at what Rosa Gigantea held in her hand. Rosa Gigantea simply said, "Well ..." and turned to Yumi. Stumped, Yumi's only response was, "I'll have to ask Tsutako-san." Since Tsutako-san had said that she could throw it away, it could probably be considered Yumi's property, but she thought it was better to get the photographer's consent.

– But that was completely straying from the main topic.

"Eriko, answer me. Has this man seduced you?"

Rosa Foetida's father asked, his blood pressure seemingly on the rise. Yumi was starting to worry if he was going to be alright.

"Yes or no."

Foolishly he stood up, but the brothers behind him made him sit back down again. His middle-age spread was getting in his way, quite the inconvenience.

"This is the man I love, but I haven't been seduced."

"Ah – "

The four Torii men all made a similar pose, hands on their heads. Like a line of Munch's scream. A simple yes or no probably would have been less shocking.

"Torii-san, how do you know this gentleman?"

The school principal asked.

"A few days ago, I ran into him at the zoo. He knows a world that I've never seen."

"A few days!?"

The brothers exclaimed, and the principal soothed them saying, "Now now."

"So, what kind of person is he?"

The oldest brother carried on, taking over from his father who had lost the will to argue. In his gridiron uniform, he was the very image of fighting spirit.

"If you're asking what he does for a living, then he's a teacher at Hanadera. But his primary occupation is a romanticist."

"What's a romanticist?"

The three men seemed to have mistaken it for a new type of profession. Like a hair stylist or a makeup artist.

"Does he make umbrellas, by any chance?"

Minako-sama asked suddenly. The four men had seemed pleased to hear he was a teacher, and were getting a bit rowdy.

"No matter how much I think about it, I still don't understand the phrase "Ronin Umbrella Maker." Rosa Foetida, you said to Yumi-san, "I want to be the wife of a ronin umbrella maker," right?"

She'd just exposed the fact that she'd been eavesdropping on their conversation. But Minako-sama was completely oblivious to that.

"Wife?"

The middle brother cried out. The way he'd singled out the important keyword while ignoring the rest highlighted his natural attention to detail.

At any rate, what the heck's a ronin umbrella maker romanticist ... Inside her innocent head, Yumi just couldn't picture the bear-man with a sword on his back winding colorful paper around an umbrella.

"Eriko-chan, you ... you've gone and got engaged to this ... this unemployed teacher who makes umbrellas to survive?"

The brothers minds appeared to be emptying too. What happened to the explanation that he worked at Hanadera?

"Ronin umbrella maker was just a figure of speech."

Rosa Foetida shrugged, her hands reaching up around her shoulders.

"So what you meant by "a ronin umbrella maker's wife", was that you wanted to suffer through life's hardships with him?"

Rosa Chinensis asked, without raising her hand for permission to speak. The sister's warning appeared to be going almost completely unheeded.

"Suffer life's hardships... ? Yeah, that sort of thing."

"Hardships?"

Rosa Foetida's father stirred from his slumber. A fresh breath of life had entered his withered body.

"I won't allow it."

The breath of life entered all the nooks and crannies of his body, extending his index finger towards Rosa Foetida.

"We raised you carefully, lovingly, my daughter, to keep you as far away from hardship as possible. What of all your parents' efforts?"

"Your efforts, papa? You mean, the way you spoiled me?"

"Teachers, please talk some sense into my daughter. Tell her she has to give up this man and stay in school."

Even when asked directly, the nuns seemed reluctant to intervene in this father/daughter quarrel.

"That's not really ... "

"Yeah."

Rosa Foetida wasn't actually working at a date club. She was just seeing a guy. That wasn't a reason for her to drop out of school, much less be expelled.

While it was an old school, established during the Meiji era, it was now attended by modern girls. They would riot if there was any nonsense.

"Mr Torii. Right from the beginning, the school has had no problem with the actions of your daughter."

See.

The school principal seemed greatly perplexed. First of all, this disturbance had been started by Rosa Foetida's father and brothers, and not by any action the school had taken.

"Fine. Even if you won't say anything, I'm sure my daughter's eyes will be opened. She'll have to learn what happens when she ignores her father's advice and runs off into the arms of some man. That she won't be able to graduate from high-school, or attend the university that she worked so hard to get in to. When she comes running back in tears, it will be far too late. Of course, her allowance will stop too."

Oh, now come the threats. Still, that was her father's trump card. It was tough for a child when their funds were cut off.

"What do you think?"

Rosa Chinensis quietly asked Rosa Gigantea.

"It's not looking good. He doesn't understand Eriko's personality at all."

The pair nodded, both in agreement.

"Opposing her is only going to spur her on even more."

"And pressure from parents is one way to turn a child rebellious."

Basically, the opinion of Rosa Foetida's closest friends was that the excessive interference coupled with Rosa Foetida's personality meant this approach was likely to be counterproductive.

"At any rate, bring this man here. I'll have a few choice words with him, and tell him to leave my daughter alone."

"Don't be absurd."

There was no way a daughter would happily introduce her boyfriend to a father who was dead-set on breaking them up.

"Where is he? Hanadera Academy?"

Rosa Foetida's father stood up. The three brothers followed behind him, like Suke-san and Kaku-san, as they headed towards the door ... Although there was one too many, it was like Mito Kōmon and his two samurai heading out to confront some **evildoer**.

"Please don't make any more of a disturbance than you already have."

Rosa Foetida chased after the line of nobles. If they marched over to Hanadera Academy, it would become a major incident embroiling two high-schools.

Just then.

"Umm, I was just stopping by."

The door opened, and who should appear but the bear-man.

"Y-y-you."

Rosa Foetida's father and brothers could only point and stammer at the enemy's unexpected invasion.

However.

"... How?"

Rosa Foetida herself was the most surprised of all.

"I'm not sure I understand what's going on exactly, but – "

He looked back over his shoulder and there was Takeshima Tsutako-san.

"I was on my way home when I saw four of the five men show up at school, so I was feeling sorry for the one that had been left out."

Tsutako-san hadn't known that the bear was really a teacher at Hanadera Academy, so she went back to the area around the zoo where she'd taken the photo, and accosted him as soon as she saw him. Saying only that there had been a serious incident with Torii Eriko-san.

"Ah, sorry, I haven't introduced myself. I'm a science teacher at the neighboring Hanadera Academy high-school. My name's Yamanobe."

Yamanobe-sensei turned towards the people in the room and bowed deeply. His beard covered most of his face, making it hard to tell his age, but he looked neater than the image in the photograph. He seemed sincere, which helped form a good impression.

"You, how dare you take our Eriko – "

Rosa Foetida's oldest brother looked like he was about to hit Yamanobe-sensei, but the father and two other brothers used all their strength to hold him back.

The oldest brother looked like he wanted to kill the man in front of him, and the rest of the family couldn't overlook an assault happening right there. And what would happen if a gridiron player really did punch someone? – Normal people were easily broken.

"Umm, what on earth is going on?"

Yamanobe-sensei didn't appear to understand anything about the situation he was involved in. Even when he was nearly attacked, he just looked on in confusion.

Then Rosa Foetida took a step forward and said:

"Yamanobe-san, would you take my hand in marriage?"

Part 4.

Of course, the entire room fell silent at that.

It was unprecedented. Had a female student ever proposed to a man in Lillian's educational guidance room before?

No.

Well, maybe someone had, but at the very least it had never been spoken about.

"Bet you a can of coffee Mr Yamanobe loses."

"I won't take that bet. The only outcome I can see is a complete defeat for Mr Yamanobe."

"Hmm."

Rosa Gigantea and Rosa Chinensis were again whispering to each other.

As for everyone else.

"..."

They were all holding their breath, waiting to see how Yamanobe-sensei would respond.

Dun-dun-dun-dun.

The music they used on quiz shows when waiting for contestants to answer reverberated through Yumi's mind.

The final answer that Yamanobe-san from Tokyo selected was –

"No."

"Aww."

Amid the disappointed sighs of the female high-school students:

"Yes!"

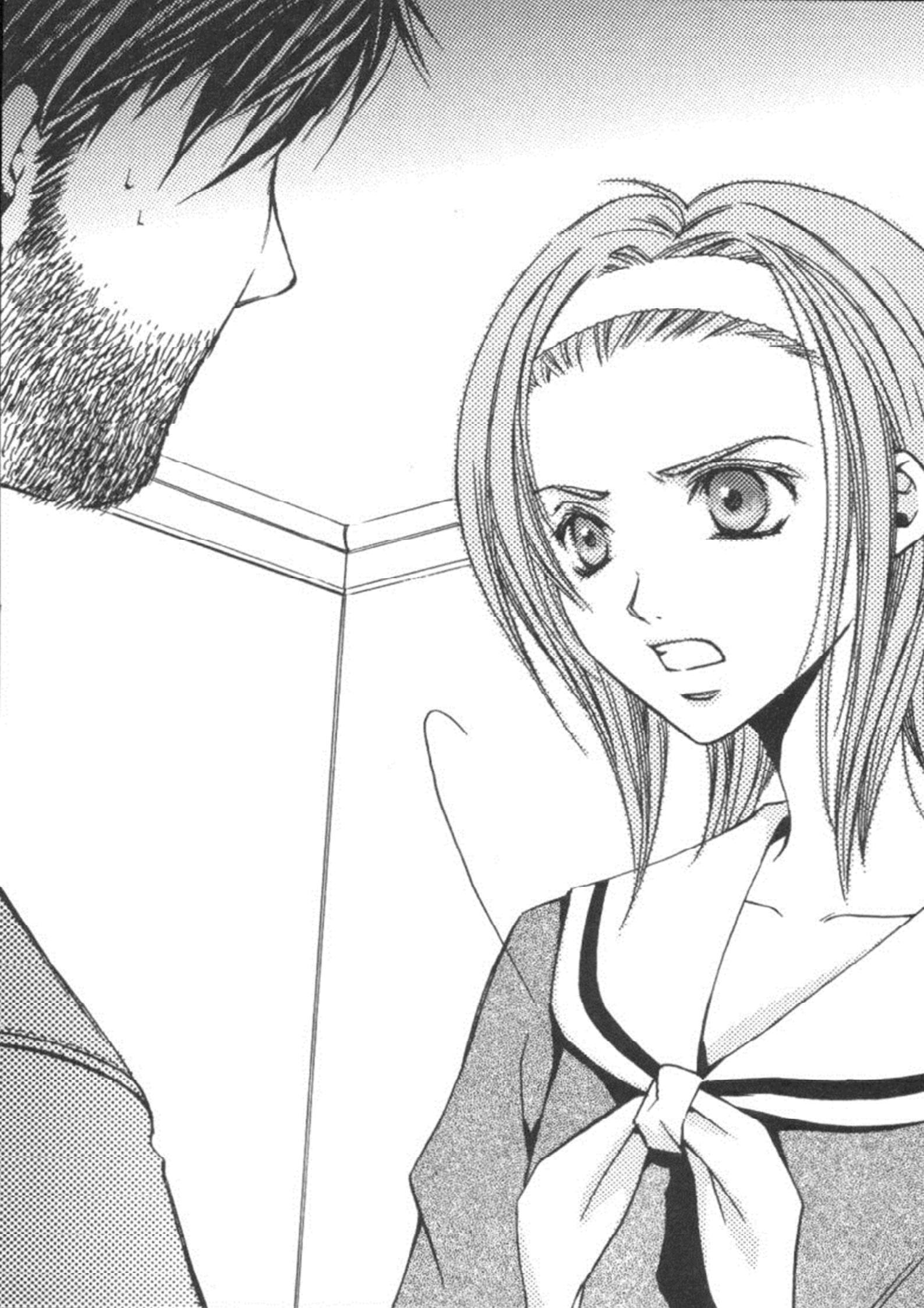
The male members of the Torii family raised their fists in triumph. Rosa Foetida's father instinctively shook Yamanobe-sensei's hand and said, "Thank-you." But it was a bit early for celebrations.

"Why not?"

Rosa Foetida, doing a complete 180 and transforming into a tragic heroine, sought an explanation from the prince.

"Why not?"

The prince, Yamanobe-sensei, blocked the question. Back to Rosa Foetida.



"Is it because of the ten year difference in our ages? Because you still haven't forgotten your deceased wife? Because you haven't got any savings? Because you spend all your pay on dinosaur fossil digs? Because you want to be free to head overseas?"

She laid out all the reasons she could think of. As a result, Yumi at least got a feel for the sort of person that Yamanobe-sensei was.

Like, ahh, so he's still in his twenties.

And, it's so sad that his wife died.

And, while she wasn't entirely sure, it seemed like "romanticist" referred to his passion for dinosaur fossils. She didn't really understand the connection, but apparently that meant he went overseas frequently, and that was why he didn't have any savings.

With everyone watching on with bated breath, Yamanobe-sensei stood up straight and informed them:

"Those are all good reasons, but the most important one is that I don't love you."

!

If this were a comic book, an exclamation mark would have appeared beside everyone's head.

"No, let me rephrase that. I've never looked at you in a romantic manner. So, you see."

Yamanobe-sensei paused for a breath.

"Counting today, we've only met three times. We haven't even spent three hours together."

Budum-ching.

If this were a comedy show, the walls would be blown down by the force of the joke, definitely. Or it'd be the final panel of a comic strip.

"Excuse me. We've spent three and a half hours together. Although it may seem shorter to you, since you spent so much time looking at the elephant."

Three hours or three and a half hours. There wasn't much of a difference either way, Rosa Foetida.

"Eriko was with you, but you spent all your time looking at an elephant? How rude."

(Hey, hey, papa Torii. Weren't you just feeling grateful to Yamanobe-sensei for turning down your daughter's proposal? On top of that, you missed the main point.)

Not having permission to speak, Yumi busied herself adding color commentary in her head as she listened on.

"Poor little Eriko."

"Let the warmth of your family heal your wounded heart."

"We'll smooth things over with papa and get your allowance reinstated."

Rosa Foetida's brothers surrounded and consoled her, as she hung her head. Those sibling relationships really did look a bit questionable.

"I understand."

Rosa Foetida said, raising her head.

"I'm glad you understand."

The corner of Yamanobe-sensei's eyes drooped, showing his relief.

The daughter's faint yearning ended in a broken heart, but with the love of her family she was able to find her own happiness, and they all lived happily ever after. – Well, that was the ending that everyone thought they were heading towards, but then:

"But I don't accept it."

"Wha!?"

Yamanobe-sensei's voice was turned inside out.

"When you said you didn't love me, that's because you don't really know me, right?"

"Huh?"

"So, please, get to know me. I wanted to know all about you, so I kept asking you all those questions, but now I realize that that was far too one-

sided. I'd like you to learn more about me, even if it only happens gradually. After that, if we find we love each other, we can get married then."

Thinking about it, Rosa Foetida wouldn't meekly withdraw. Opposing her would only spur her on. The rejection would just make her persevere until he said he loved her.

"That sounds fine. I concur."

The school principal said, glancing at the silent homeroom teacher.

"It is not fine."

Rosa Foetida's father and brothers voices mixed as they expressed their disapproval.

"If you keep being so strict, sooner or later your daughter will start sneaking around, seeing men behind your back. Would you prefer that?"

"No, that wouldn't be good."

"And I'm certain Yamanobe-sensei will conduct himself honorably."

The school principal was incredible. The way she skillfully handled this touchy subject.

"Mm... But what about him ... what does he think?"

Rosa Foetida's father glanced at "him" as he stumbled over his words. And so, the gaze of everyone in the room fell on Yamanobe-sensei.

"Yamanobe-sensei?"

Rosa Gigantea sidled up to him and whispered.

"You'll be better off if you agree to this. Eriko's nickname is The Hound – if you run, she will chase you."

Eriko the Hound? Who has ever called her that?

You, Rosa Gigantea are Sei, Queen of Lies.

"I, I understand. If we can do this as friends."

Yamanobe-sensei said while writing his address and phone number on a piece of paper torn from a notebook, then handed this to Rosa Foetida's father, saying, "A pleasure to make your acquaintance." He was taking this seriously, as the school principal had anticipated.

At any rate, it looked like Rosa Foetida and Yamanobe-sensei would be openly going out together. Although it was a long road indeed from "friends" to marriage.

"But, now that Yamanobe-sensei's agreed, does that mean Rosa Foetida will lose interest – ?"

Yumi asked, suddenly anxious.

Rosa Chinensis answered, saying, "Don't worry."

"Eriko isn't going to get bored of such an interesting toy so quickly."

Having survived the ordeal, Yamanobe-sensei made his exit, but his unusual marching gait combined with the unfamiliar visitor's slippers led to him falling over in a heap, looking less like a romanticist and more like a buffoon.

Part 5.

"And so, Rosa Foetida's love is currently progressing. We of the Lillian's Girls Academy High-School Newspaper Club are using this special edition of the "Lillian Kawaraban" to describe the uproar caused by the short-story, "The Golden Rose," published in the preceding issue."

"That's fine," Rosa Foetida laughed. That was her initial impression after Yumi had brought the initial draft to the third-year chrysanthemum group classroom, after it had been dropped off at the Rose Mansion by Minako-sama during the lunch break.

Rosa Foetida put her empty juice box in the bin at the back of the classroom, then invited Yumi over to the nearby courtyard. The weather was nice. It really felt like a spring day.

"If you think it's okay, they'll probably just go with this."

The sun came streaming through between the clouds and Yumi squinted.

"Okay, okay. What did everyone else think?"

"They'd been expecting an apology or a correction, but it turned out to be a documentary. My onee-sama was shocked."

Sachiko-sama had felt like an outsider for the entire event, so she hadn't said a single word of disagreement. Instead, she'd read more enthusiastically than everyone else.

"It never would have happened without the newspaper club. But Minako-san didn't write this article, did she?"

"Ah, you knew? Apparently her soeur, Mami-san, wrote it."

Minako-sama was taking a sabbatical to reflect on her actions, and wasn't involved in the special edition. She seemed to be deeply affected by what had happened. Even so, it probably wouldn't be long until she returned to her usual ways.

"So I suppose Mami-san will be head of the newspaper club next year then."

"Only if Minako-sama retires quietly."

"That's true."

Rosa Foetida stood up, stretching her legs, and something ran past. It was Lunch.

"Ah, Goronta."

"... You call her Goronta too, Rosa Foetida?"

No matter how many times she heard it, Yumi couldn't get used to it. She had known it as Lunch for too long now.

"Well, that's what Sei called her. Come here, Goronta."

Rosa Foetida beckoned as she called out, and Lunch momentarily stopped and looked her way. But then all she did was let out a meow before taking off at full speed once again.

"I'll bet she's found something interesting."

Rosa Foetida smiled as the cat disappeared in the hedge.

"I can tell."

She said, somewhat resembling a cat herself.

Very Busy Days

Monday

Part 1.

"Ah."

With that.

Sachiko-sama (Rosa Chinensis en bouton), Rei-sama (Rosa Foetida en bouton) and Shimako-san (Rosa Gigantea en bouton), all stood up simultaneously.

After a morning spent rehearsing for the graduation ceremony, the two afternoon classes had been effortlessly dispatched and lessons were concluded for the day. As always, the regular group of five scholars had gathered in the Rose Mansion. Before beginning their daily tasks, there was a brief period of peace and tranquility spent enjoying fragrant tea ... as you can see, I, Fukuzawa Yumi, am still feeling the effects of my sixth-period classical literature class.

Setting that aside for now.

"Yumi, what did you just say?"

Naturally, the one asking the question was my onee-sama, Sachiko-sama.

"Umm ... "

Oh dear. I quickly tried to determine how I'd failed my onee-sama this time. I've become accustomed to being the soeur of my beloved Sachiko-sama, but the word "unworthy" has been hovering over my head for six months now. Just hearing my onee-sama say, "Yumi," in a slightly harsh tone was enough to remind me of the many times I've failed her in the past.

"Was it, "The way things are, it doesn't really feel like a graduation ceremony?""

Strange. Even repeating the words I'd spoken immediately before they all stood up, I couldn't see what was wrong with them.

"A bit before that."

"Then, "The third-years are lucky, they don't have end of semester exams?""

"Not that far back. Come on, get it together. Before we forget what it was."

Even if Sachiko-sama said that, when I was speaking earlier it had been more like I was talking to myself than anything else. It'd be even more strange if I remembered each and every word I'd said. But even if I couldn't remember it by myself, it was wrong of her to get mad at her petit soeur for that too.

Still, hearing my onee-sama selfishly lash out had felt good, so it looks like I've been reduced to the status of deviant.

I guess that's the result of being molded by Rosa Gigantea.

Still, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama was growing more and more irritated as she waited intently for an answer, and that would lead to even harsher words.

"Yumi, why are you daydreaming!?"

"I, I'm sorry."

I yelped and dropped my head, like a dog covering its ears. No matter how much I loved her, Sachiko-sama's thunder was terrifying.

"Hey, Yumi-chan, weren't you saying something about the Roses?"

This year's Rosa Foetida en bouton, as well as Mister Lillian – although rumor had it that title was going to be retired and awarded to her in perpetuity – that is to say, Hasekura Rei-sama, interjected with a question. She'd probably thought it was a silly soeur fight and didn't want to watch.

"Ah, the going away party for the Roses?"

I said, remembering. And then:

"Right, that."

"Exactly."

"Ah, what should we do?"

The red, yellow and white boutons said in turn. Why? I had no idea.

"What should we do about what?"

Yoshino-san asked, looking at Shimako-san standing bolt upright.

"We forgot all about it."

"Again, forgot what?"

"The going away party for the Roses?"

I asked without thinking. Based on the way the conversation had been going, that was the only possible answer.

"Exactly. Just like Shimako-san said. What should we do?"

The usually resplendent Sachiko-sama had turned oddly pale. The only other time I've seen her this shaken was in the jeans shop.

"Ah – I thought we'd forgotten something. So that's what it was."

Rei-sama took things in at her own pace. Her composure was probably due to the discipline instilled in her by her martial arts training. Then again, if Yoshino-san's stories about the "occasional gigantic fool Rei-chan" were to be believed, perhaps it was simply a matter of situational familiarity.

"The going away party for the Roses?"

I said. Sachiko-sama looked flabbergasted, responding with, "You know, that's all you've been saying for a while now, Yumi."

"Haa."

"Well, it's fine. Thanks to your solo prattling, we were saved from making a careless blunder."

"Umm, okay. But I don't really understand what you're talking about."

My mind was sloshing around in confusion. I heard those feelgood phrase like, "Thanks to you," and "we were saved," but it was honestly a bit sad that I didn't know the actual feat I'd accomplished.

Indeed, I had said, "The going away party for the Roses." The rehearsal for the graduation ceremony had gone smoothly, and there was the third-years' farewell party coming up, which was bound to be a lot more exciting, so I'd been thinking about how the actual graduation ceremony would be when I opened my mouth.

"Don't make me say it again. We completely forgot our onee-samas' farewell party."

The three boutons all had the same distraught expressions as Sachiko-sama flatly muttered this.

"Ah, but. So then."

I looked to Yoshino-san for support. I thought she was in the same boat as me, but at some point she'd made it to the opposite shore. In other words, she'd crossed over to the "People who understand the situation" faction.

"... I see, a farewell party for the Roses ... so when you were talking about "third-years" you meant graduating students."

Yoshino-san nodded to herself. Hey, share some of that info with me, will you.

"The Roses are going to graduate, aren't they?"

Reluctantly, I fished for a clue. Then Yoshino-san raised her index finger and said, "There's a subtle difference."

"The Roses are indeed going to graduate, but you can't say that "graduating students" equals "the Roses.""

So, what? Was this some kind of math party? – this question flew around my head as I thought.

"Ah, oh!"

I'd finally figured out what to say.

"The bouton organized "Third-years' Farewell Party" is for all the graduating students!? I thought – "

I thought it was just going to be a relatively small and intimate farewell party held in the Rose Mansion. Based on her earlier response, Yoshino-san had definitely had the same misunderstanding.

"We've been saying that all along."

Sachiko-sama sighed.

"Hold on, we may not have actually said that. Since we all knew what it meant, we may not have explained it fully. But Yoshino and Yumi-san are first-years, so they won't know what happened last year."

Rei-sama rested her chin on her fist, in the classic "Thinker" pose. The way she looked, she was without peer. While I may not be Takeshima Tsutako-san, photography club ace, if I'd had a camera with me I definitely would have clicked the shutter.

"At the very least, I didn't mention anything to Yumi-san or Yoshino-san ... so I suppose it is true."

Shimako-san and Rei-sama were in agreement. Hearing that, Sachiko-sama had no choice but to say, "Perhaps so," and back down.

"The three of us have been under such pressure to ensure the grand task was a success that we lost sight of something dear to us. It's a mistake unbecoming of a bouton."

Just like that, Sachiko-sama became dispirited, so Rei-sama patted her on the shoulder.

"We should have taken precautions to prevent this."

So, for the time being, the three boutons resumed their seats.

Basically, it went like this:

For the last week, the boutons had been frantically preparing for the "Third-years' Farewell Party." This occupied so much of their thoughts that they'd completely forgotten the private farewell party. And their petit soeurs, who were supposed to cover for them in these situations, had stupidly been under the impression that the farewell party their onee-samas were preparing was actually for the Roses. Even though it was actually a massive event for the entire school.

"Classes wouldn't be canceled just for a private farewell party."

Sachiko-sama tapped the small blackboard hanging beside the sink as she spoke. Indeed, it had, "Farewell Party, Saturday, Starts at 9," written on it, but the loop of the 9 was very faint so it looked like 1. The boutons knew it was happening during class time, so they saw it was 9, but Yoshino-san and I read it as 1, since we thought it was taking place in the afternoon. So it hadn't looked suspicious to anyone, despite both groups thinking different things.

Thinking about it now, if it was just a private farewell party, the bouton's wouldn't have treated it so sensitively. Plus when I was talking about the "Third-years' Farewell Party" with some of my classmates, it had sort of felt like we were talking across each other.

Mistake was piled on top of mistake like a mille-feuille, with the end result being that it wasn't until today that the truth came to light.

"Wait, when should we have it?"

"Schedules, schedules."

The boutons hastily confirmed their schedules. Since it was a private party, it would be pointless if anyone was missing. But leaving it until after graduation just to get everyone there would be bad too.

"Saturday afternoon."

Rei-sama circled her calendar.

"That's the only possible time."

Sachiko-sama agreed. By holding it after the third-years' farewell party, they could be reasonably certain that the Roses would be at school.

"We'll have to confirm that with the Roses quickly."

"I'll do it."

I stood up and took off towards the door. It was a soeur's duty to provide support to her onee-sama. While I may not have brains or looks, I could make up for it with legwork.

"Ah, Yumi, wait."

At roughly the same time that Sachiko-sama's voice reached me, something light crashed into my back.

"Oww."

Well, it didn't really hurt. I looked down at my feet and something was skipping around on the floor.

"An eraser ... ?"

When I picked it up, I knew I'd seen that soccer-ball patterned eraser somewhere before.

"Nice shot, even if I do say so myself."

The owner of the eraser, Yoshino-san, laughed as she asked for it back. Throwing something at someone to get them to stop, who did she think she was, **Zenigata Heiji?**

"Please wait until we've finished talking before rushing off."

Sachiko-sama let out a deep sigh.

"Even if I asked you to go out and look for them now, they wouldn't still be here."

"Ah, I see."

Damn. I'd failed again.

"You really are restless, aren't you."

My onee-sama's offhand remarked stabbed me like a knife. No matter how you looked at it, being described as "restless" was not a compliment.

I could take those sort of comments in my stride when everything was going swimmingly, but if I was feeling a bit off then they would get me down. Thinking she'd be better off with a less restless petit soeur.

"Isn't it great that she's so energetic? I think we should let Yumi-chan contact our onee-samas."

Rei-sama said, grinning. Yoshino-san's "Rei-chan" was as kind as ever.

"We'll need an answer by this time tomorrow. Just ask them whether or not they're free Saturday afternoon. And, let's see, if it's not convenient for anyone, I suppose we'll have to think some more about when we could schedule it this week."

Sachiko-sama watched Rei-sama quickly list off the instructions before resignedly turning to face me.

"Don't push yourself too hard."

"Okay."

At the time, I replied energetically.

Later, I would miserably recall those words. But for now it was inconceivable.

Part 2.

"Ahh, the farewell party?"

On the other end of the phone, Rosa Chinensis chuckled.

"It's actually happening then?!"

"Yes, of course."

On this end, I clenched my hand into a fist and responded forcefully.

It would be a disaster if I left it until tomorrow but then couldn't get a hold of them, so I decided to call the three Roses and ask them over the telephone. I came home, freshened myself up, changed clothes, then took the telephone receiver and holed up in my room.

The decision was easier to make than I'd initially thought, perhaps due to my experience calling Rosa Foetida's house the other day. At the very least, I thought it showed a remarkable level of maturity when compared to how nervous I'd been about calling Sachiko-sama's household. Although I had written the Roses' real names on a piece of notepaper and done a quick rehearsal.

"I didn't get an invitation, so I thought maybe it wasn't on this year."

"Pr-preposterous."

Rosa Chinensis was as sharp as ever.

"You didn't just forget?!"

"Absolutely not."

Not just sharp, but a bit cutting. Prickly.

"I see. Teeheehee."

"Yeah, we'd never forget such a thing. Teeheheehee."

I didn't say anything unnecessary, instead deceiving her with a giggle. If I got rushed and said the wrong thing, I'd only end up digging my own grave.

"Okay. Saturday afternoon. I'll keep it free. But other than Saturday, I'll be at school most days. So if the plan changes, let me know."

For the next few seconds until I hung up the phone, I could still hear Rosa Chinensis giggling.

* * *

"Ahh, the farewell party?"

Taking the receiver, Rosa Foetida wheezed as she responded.

"Um, it sounds like you're out of breath, are you okay?"

"Yeah," she said, then after a short pause, "I'm fine. I just got home, had to run all the way."

Her breathing was ragged. It really sounded like she'd just come through the door.

"My curfew's at 7."

"I see."

Looking at the clock, it was 7:01pm. Papa Torii may have been indulgent in the past, but now it seemed he wouldn't tolerate even a single minute of tardiness. Well, his feelings were somewhat understandable.

"I'm still not getting my way on the dates either."

"That's a shame."

Rosa Foetida, Torii Eriko-sama, had just recently been charmed by a substitute teacher at Hanadera Academy and declared her intent towards him. Her father and brothers cherished her above all else, so were surely not amused by this.

"Saturday, you said? The soeurs are holding it, so of course I'll be there."

"You don't have a date?"

"I did have a date, but it's okay. We didn't have anything planned, I was just going to follow him around like usual, so this takes precedence."

"Thanks for that."

I bowed deeply, hitting my head on the edge of her bed.

"Yumi-chan, you've become quite reliable. You're almost a bouton."

In spite of that, Rosa Foetida praised me. But it was all washed away by the clouding tears and forehead pain.

* * *

"Ahh, the farewell party?"

Rosa Gigantea said, after a yawn.

"Hmm, is that a thing?"

"It is, it is."

The reaction from the Roses had all been different. Well, that showed their individuality.

"Maybe you're right. Yeah, you're right. I remember we did it last year."

She probably had an ulterior motive for forgetting, or not wanting to recall it. After losing her dear friend Shiori-san, Rosa Gigantea had to bid farewell to the onee-sama she depended upon. This time one year ago.

"Saturday? That's soon. By the way, Yumi-chan, what are you doing?"

She seemed serious, but I could hear a humming on the other end of the phone.

"What do you mean?"

"For the entertainment."

"E-entertainment?"

Unintentionally, the volume of my voice rose. Because no-one had said anything about that.

"You're kidding."

I laughed, thinking it a joke. Rosa Gigantea had a habit of teasing her juniors, so this was probably just her having fun.

"No, it's true."

Rosa Gigantea didn't laugh along with me.

"It's a tradition. Didn't you hear? Well, Sachiko and Rei have probably been busy. Plus, put those girls on the spot and they can do anything."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, the party's for the graduating onee-samas to enjoy themselves. So it's only natural that the first-years should do a performance, to liven things up."

"Huh, no way."

I'd sing if I had to, but the thought left me feeling blue. I'm no songstress like Kanina Shizuka-sama, so my singing would probably pollute their ears.

"It's up to you whether you believe me or not. Usually it's the sort of thing you'd prepare yourself, and the whole point of that sort of party performance is that you can do it anywhere, anytime. You wouldn't necessarily be told ahead of time. But I thought it might be tough for you if you were put on the spot, so I thought I'd warn my cute little Yumi-chan ahead of time."

"That's the second time you've said, "put on the spot." What on earth do you mean?"

"Last year, the first-years were put on the spot by the third-years, who asked them to get up and have a go. But those girls were able to pull it off successfully."

"What did they do?"

When I thought of party performances, what came to mind was plate spinning, magic tricks and the "**Helping Hands**" comedy routine – that sort of thing. But I couldn't imagine the boutons doing any of those things.

"Rei crushed an apple in her hand, and Sachiko sang as she danced a ballet routine. A solo "Dance of the Little Swans," from memory."

Hyaah.

"I've never heard anything about that."

It was a lie. Definitely a lie.

"Silly little Yumi-chan. They made fools of themselves to get a laugh. Of course they're not going to tell their petit soeurs about that. They probably don't even want to think about it."

"They made fools of themselves?"

"Of course."

An ominous laugh slipped out of Rosa Gigantea.

"Rather than admiring some serious performance, I want to laugh from the bottom of my heart."

I involuntarily let go of the handset, dropping it.

– It looked like I wouldn't be able to get away with just singing something.

Tuesday

Part 1.

"I haven't heard anything about that."

Yoshino-san said.

"Neither have I."

Shimako-san was in the same boat.

"Yumi-san, I think you've been tricked by Rosa Gigantea."

That was the opinion shared by my two classmates.

After calling the Roses, I'd phoned Yoshino-san and Shimako-san at their houses, to tell them what I'd heard from Rosa Gigantea. As a result, we came to school a bit early today and were currently holding a strategy meeting in the library.

The reading room had high ceilings, so it was cold early in the morning. Still wearing our coats, we held a clandestine, face-to-face meeting. Because you could never tell when the boutons would show up at the Rose Mansion.

"Since Yoshino-san hasn't heard anything from Rei-sama, I think it must be false information."

After thinking it over during the night, I was leaning towards it being a prank too. That Sachiko-sama wouldn't prepare a tape, instead singing as she performed a ballet dance, was simply beyond belief.

"But "The Dance of the Little Swans" is real."

Shimako-san said, after flipping through a ballet reference book. On the page she held open was a color photograph showing four dancers in swan costume holding hands and dancing elegantly. The library was a pretty convenient place for a meeting, since we could look over reference material easily.

"It is too."

I groaned. Rosa Gigantea's lie had been a bit too specific.

"But would Sachiko-sama dance it alone?"

She had a lot of pride, so it seemed like she'd avoid making herself a target of ridicule.

"She would if Rosa Chinensis asked her, right? Or if they said she wouldn't be able to do it, she's the type of person who would just to prove them wrong."

Oh Yoshino-san, sharp work.

"When I think about it, there's a chance Rei-chan would get fired up too. And since she's shy, she wouldn't want to tell me about it."

We'd done an about face and were now heading in the "might be true" direction. In that case.

"I guess we should prepare something then."

"Even if we don't need it, it's better than the alternative."

"Let's keep it a secret from our onee-samas."

We looked at each other and agreed. With our plan in place, the next thing was who would do what.

"I'm not that good at comedy."

Shimako-san looked troubled.

"It's okay, don't worry."

Yoshino-san patted Shimako-san on the shoulders, to reassure her. Nobody expected her to do a comedy routine.

"Let's see. Shimako-san, you're a master of the arts, aren't you? You can perform traditional Japanese dances, right?"

"... Yes."

Shimako-san agreed dubiously. In contrast, Yoshino-san seemed to be enjoying herself. She looked like she really loved this sort of thing.

"Can you dance improv?"

"What do you mean by improv?"

"I mean, could you dance to some non-traditional music? Without choreography, could you make it up yourself?"

"If I knew the song, I could manage."

"Okay. Since you'll be as busy as the other boutons, how about you dance to some music that we organize for the event."

Like a dictator, Yoshino-san was rapidly making decisions by herself. Well, we didn't have much time, so that was probably a good thing.

"So, I won't know the music until the performance itself?"

Shimako-san still seemed uneasy.

"Well, that'll make it more interesting, right?"

Really?

Yoshino-san was up to something. Nobody expected Shimako-san to do a stand-up comedy routine, but it looked like Yoshino-san was trying to steer it in a comedic direction.

"So then, Yumi-san and I will be in charge of laughs."

"Laughs, huh."

I got a very different treatment to Shimako-san.

"I'll do a magic show. Yumi-san, you can do some kind of party performance."

"Wha, a party performance!?"

Yoshino-san took an "Introduction to Party Performances" book off the shelf and held it out to me. The other book she was holding was about magic, for her own use.

"But I can't do a party performance."

I wailed. I'd never done any kind of party performance in my entire life. Not only that, but I'd never even seen one either.

"Quit complaining, there's no time. Yumi-san, I'm sure you'll be able to put on a funny show."

The Rose families were skilled at flattery.

"I guess I haven't got a choice."

Reluctantly I took hold of the "Introduction to Party Performances" book.

Nevertheless. Wasn't that a backhanded compliment?

Part 2.

"Yumi-san."

At lunchtime, as I was hurrying to the Rose Mansion carrying my lunch, a voice called out to stop me.

"Will Rosa Chinensis en bouton be present at the Rose Mansion during the lunch break?"

It was Saeko-san. She was the petit soeur of the head of the flower arranging club. Usually we didn't speak much, well, about as much as normal classmates.

"Yeah, probably."

I nodded, thinking she'd be there.

"But there's still a lot of preparation to be done, so I'm not sure if she'll be there for the entire time."

I added, just in case. The boutons had been really busy lately. Like only coming to the Rose Mansion to eat lunch. Plus there were lots of guests that came to see them while they were eating.

"Hmm, that's a pain. I suppose Shimako-san would know."

She looked around restlessly, but Shimako-san was so busy she'd probably left the classroom already.

"What was it about?"

I asked, and Saeko-san responded with, "Well, the truth is," as though she were about to start gossiping.

"It's about the "Third-years' Farewell Party." The flower arranging club has been asked to set up a display in the auditorium."

"Yeah."

This I knew. The "Third-years' Farewell Party" was organized by the student council, but it was open for all students to participate, either through clubs or as classes, to hold displays or put on performances and liven things up. – Although, embarrassingly, I only learned this information at yesterday's meeting.

"We were wondering when we should bring the arrangements in. We'd like to know when we can start setting up, and when we have to be done by."

"Ahh, that's not part of Shimako-san's domain. ... Alright, when I see my onee-sama, I'll ask her. Is it okay if I get back to you later today?"

"Really? That'll be great, thanks."

Saeko-san squeezed my hand tightly.

It was exciting thinking that I was helping out with the student council work. And in this way I was helping my onee-sama too.

"Ah, Yumi-san."

On the staircase, a second-year student called out to me as we passed.

"Brilliant timing. I'm from the art club. We've finished the signboard for the "Third-years' Farewell Party," so can you let the boutons know to pick it up from the art club's room as soon as possible."

"Ah, okay."

So that's setup time for the flower arranging club, and signboard for the art club.

So that I wouldn't forget, I crossed two of my fingers.

Part 3.

I was exhausted by the time I got home, probably because my normally unused faculties had been running at full capacity.

The work had built up after the initial task, and I'd now become something of a convenient messenger to the hard-to-reach boutons.

After school, I'd made the round trip between the Rose Mansion and the club rooms twice, on errands for the story telling club and the dance club, plus I'd had to stop in at the office and use the payphone to check if the flowers we'd ordered had arrived at the florist yet. Despite all this, I still had it easier than the boutons.

I was so tired that I listlessly munched on the dinner side-dishes of sauteed lotus root and burdock. In the bath, it felt like I was about to fall asleep right there and then.

"Now then."

When I got out of the bath, I wanted to climb into bed straight away, but there was still one task I had left to do.

"Yumi-chan, what on earth are you looking for?"

My mother called out dubiously upon seeing her daughter rustling through the closet.

"Well, a couple years ago, dad got really into party performances, didn't he?"

The father in question was out tonight having drinks with a client to celebrate the completion of their new building. I didn't know what time he'd be back, so I made a guess about where that stuff would be and started looking. The closet had looked like a good place to keep some small props. The truth was, I still hadn't decided what to do for the farewell party.

"Ah, you mean that class reunion trip to the hot springs?"

"Yeah."

I picked through the contents of the cardboard box we'd christened the "Junk Box," looking at each item in turn. A yoyo and a pocket-size ball-and-cup game. A procession of items, mainly promotional goods that would be

forgotten about whether thrown away or not, greeted me with a cheery, "Good day," or, rather, "Good evening."

"What was it that dad did, do you know?"

"Hmm, what was it? I think it was Nankin Tamasudare or that one where you draw a face on your stomach and make it move."

Mom yawned. It was 11 o'clock at night.

"Either way, it was a comedy act, right?"

"Yeah. That's the type of person he is."

And since his blood flowed in my veins, it was only natural that I'd be put in charge of comedy.

"Oh, there's lots of magic tricks."

"Ah. Yuuki might have used those."

Mom asked, "How about these?" But Yoshino-san was already doing a magic act, so they were no good.

"Oh? What's this?"

Mom asked, pulling out a furoshiki cloth bundle and setting it on the tatami mat floor.

"You mean there's something in the closet that you don't know about, mom?"

"It happens from time to time."

When either dad, myself or my younger brother Yuuki didn't want to disturb her, and just put it in the closet ourselves, or else if it was something that made so little impression that she forgot about putting it in there.

"It's the former."

Mom smiled as she said this.

"Are you sure you're not the culprit here, Yumi-chan?"

"I have no memory of it whatsoever. Should we open it?"

"Go ahead. If someone didn't want it found, they would have put it somewhere else."

Her reasoning was solid. Our family generally considered the closet a shared space.

"Now then, what will we find?"

My heart beating with excitement, I picked at the knot with my fingers. But it was tight, like an official seal. Perhaps the person that tied this knot never intended for it to be opened, and had put a curse on it like the Egyptian pyramids.

Just as I decided I wouldn't look if it contained something like photos of naked women, the knot came undone.

What appeared inside was –

"What's this? Cassette tape, hand towel, 5 yen piece and ... a sieve?"

Mom and I looked at each other.

Wednesday

Part 1.

"Onee-sama, a visitor from the story telling club is here. She wants to discuss the musical accompaniment."

"Ah, show her in."

"Okay."

I guided the club president to the room on the second floor, then prepared some tea. It was a token of hospitality we provided to all visitors that came out to the Rose Mansion. There was no shortage of people who would only approach us to discuss matters in the hallways, so we were always grateful to those who came to visit.

It was after school.

Rei-sama was at a meeting for the sports clubs participating in the "Third-Years' Farewell Party." They couldn't hold a competition or anything like that, so the sports clubs decided to put on a performance highlighting each club's styles and techniques. Yoshino-san was taking a message to the clubhouse, while Shimako-san was at the shops on an errand.

Whether it was lunchtime or after school, there were a lot of people coming and going from the Rose Mansion nowadays. It reminded me a bit of the school festival. Although one obvious difference was that, back then, the Roses had been running things, but now the boutons had that role.

"Here you go."

I poured a cup of tea just for our visitor. Initially, I would also prepare tea for whoever was meeting with the visitor, but Sachiko-sama told me not to. She said her stomach was getting bloated from having tea with each and every one of the endless procession of visitors.

"Sorry to bother you."

The club president sipped at the black tea like you would Japanese tea. Her actions were refined. Despite wearing her school uniform, she had an air about her as though she was wearing a traditional kimono.

"Have you got confirmation from the florist?"

Sachiko-sama asked me, as though she'd just remembered.

"Ah, yes."

I replied, stifling a yawn.

"I did that yesterday. They said the roses will be delivered between 4:30 and 5 on Friday afternoon. They'll be brought by car to the back gate, and someone will have to be there to accept them."

"Alright, I'll leave that to you, Yumi. Get Yoshino-chan to help you too."

"Okay."

"Having you two around is a real lifesaver."

It had been a while since Sachiko-sama was grateful to me, so I was overjoyed but also a little bit embarrassed.

But when I thought about the hard work that the boutons were doing, it made me want to enthusiastically help out where I could.

And when I remembered how I couldn't do anything to help during the school council elections, it made me glad that there was work for me to do.

After giving my stiff neck a quick rub, I set to work on my next task.

Part 2.

"Yuuki."

"Mm?"

"What's thi~s?"

Visiting my brother in his room, I motioned towards the cloth bundle from before.

"..."

He didn't say anything, but his eyes were swimming. Visibly shaken. The culprit had been found.

"I asked dad, but he said he didn't know. This is yours, right?"

"Well, so what?"

Spinning his chair around, Yuuki turned his back on me. Oh ho, now he'd turned defiant.

"Admit it."

I grabbed the back of the chair and spun him around to face me again.

"No way."

Yuuki fled from the chair, escaping to his bed.

"I'm going to sleep, leave now."

"You were just at your desk, why are you suddenly going to bed?"

"That's just what I do."

He tried to burrow under the blankets, but instead they fell off.

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me about this."

Did he really want to hide this part of his past so badly? Even so, I didn't call off the investigation. Following him to the bed, I lent over my younger brother and dangled the bundle in front of his face.

"That's been sealed. You can't just drag it out."

"Then why did you hide it in the closet? If you couldn't stand to look at it, you should have thrown it out in the trash."

"If it was trash, I would have thrown it out. But, unfortunately, it's not mine."

"Huh?"

"I'll explain everything, so get off. You're lying all over me."

Yuuki said sullenly.

Oh ho, so that was my mistake. It was tough on a first-year high-school boy when a spunky young girl got too close to him, even if it was his own blood related older sister.

"Someone gave it to me to look after."

After I'd stepped back, Yuuki got up and straightened out his pajamas.

"You're looking after it, huh."

He started to talk without really saying anything. I would even have welcomed his face turning red. Was he mad at me? Or was he, due to a certain someone's influence, completely uninterested in girls? That would be an alarming proposition.

"But there's no space in my room, and I thought that if I made it through the spring cleanup, no-one would find it."

"So who gave it to you?"

I had a bad feeling about who this "someone" was.

"Kashiwagi-sempai."

"Oh Yuuki."

There it was. Despite guessing right, I wasn't particularly happy.

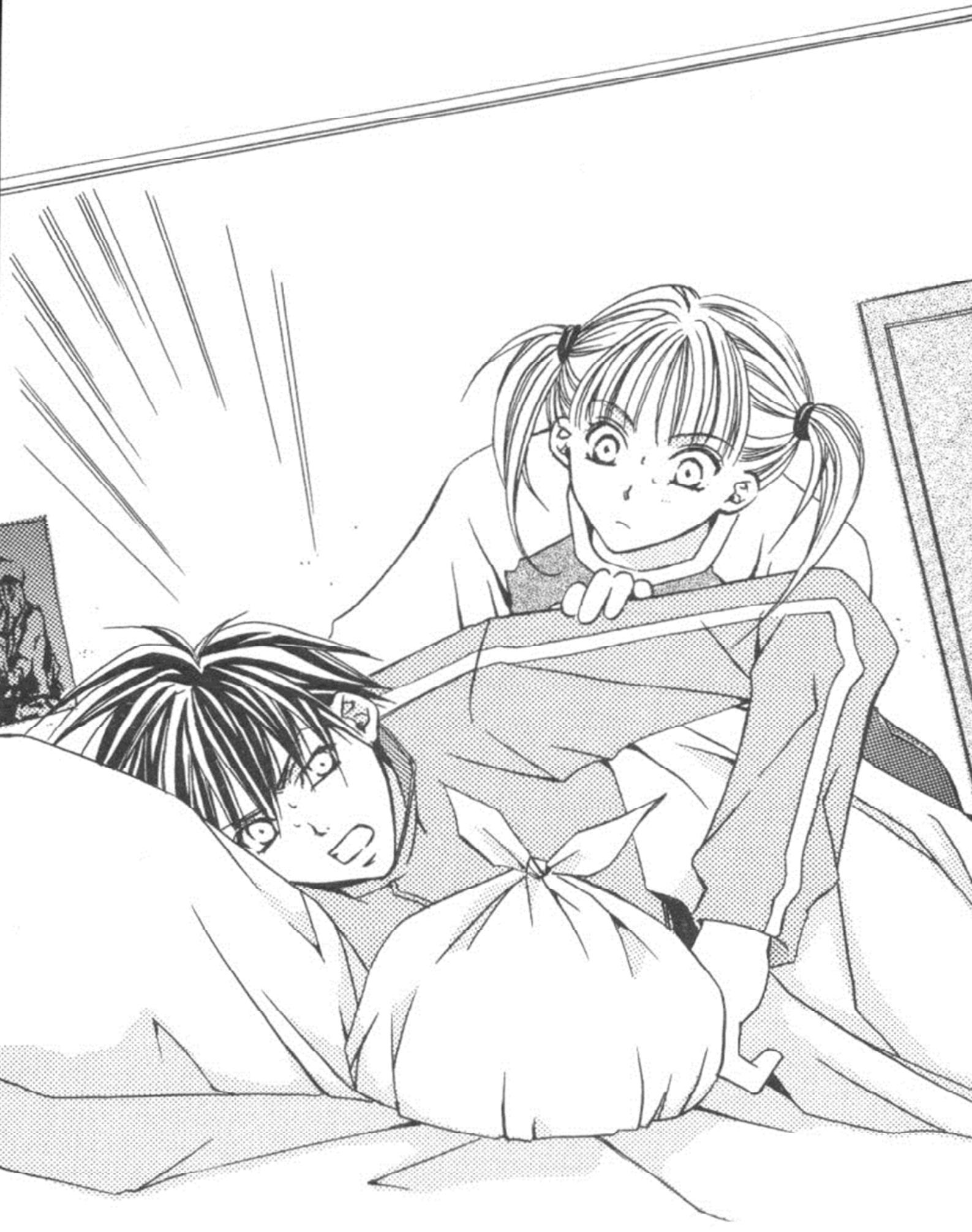
"But Kashiwagi-san's graduating soon, isn't he?"

So give it back. I tossed the bundle to Yuuki.

"If I could do that, it wouldn't be hidden in the closet."

Like a true dodge-ball player, Yuuki caught it with both hands.

"Ah, right."



"They call it an endowment. Every year, some unfortunate first-year gets stuck with looking after it."

"Uh-huh."

So it has to make an appearance when it's publicly handed down to the next unfortunate first-year student.

"Let me borrow it."

I sat down next to Yuuki and pointed at the bundle.

"Okay, but ... don't tell me..."

Yuuki stared at me in wonder.

"Yep, it's exactly what you're thinking. Teach me how to use these. I want to do it for a farewell party."

Hearing my answer his face turned serious and he said, "Are you stupid?"

"What's so stupid?"

I interrogated Yuuki. Most of the time, what he said was sensible enough, but this time I couldn't follow him.

"You're going to, of your own free will, have people laugh at you?"

"No. They'll be laughing with me."

"..."

"..."

After a moment's silence, Yuuki suddenly laughed.

"That's the sort of thing Kashiwagi-sempai would say."

"Wha. You're lumping me in with him!?"

That was a bit unpleasant. While I didn't have any personal grudge against him, just knowing he was my onee-sama's fiance was enough to make me dislike him.

"Pretty much. The situation may be a bit different, but that's the sort of thing he said."

Yuuki said, "Alright," and undid the seal of the bundle.

"It's fine. I'll be your instructor, dear sister. The version with musical accompaniment will do, right?"

"Thank-you very much, professor!"

I bowed. Becoming his pupil before Yuuki could change his mind.

However.

"One, two, three, four."

It was only when I started practice that I found out how strict an instructor he was.

Thursday

Part 1.

One, two, thee, four.

The music from the cassette played over and over in my mind.

"You're on day duty, right? Our teacher said the class journal hasn't been delivered yet."

Back from the staff room, my classmate conveyed the message from our homeroom teacher.

"Ah, yes."

I raised my head in surprise. I'd put my school bag on top of my desk, and zoned out as I was putting my pencil case in it. Sleep deprivation, probably.

"Sorry, I'll take it now."

I wrote the name of tomorrow's day duty person in the right-hand corner of the front blackboard, then picked up my bag and the class journal and left the room.

School was finally over. Because I'd been on duty, today had felt like an incredibly long day.

(Scoop, scoop. Discard, pose.)

"Okay, thanks for your effort."

I handed our teacher the class journal, bowed quickly and left the staff room. But I still had a number of odd jobs left to do.

I had to go with Yoshino-san to the art club's room to pick up the signboard, then to the flower arranging club to borrow some vases.

(Quick spin.)

Oh no. I'd spaced out again, drawn completely into that world inside my head. I had to swap that music for something else. It may have been off key, but for now I started mentally singing "Maria-sama's soul," and headed towards the Rose Mansion. But before I got there.

"I'm from the koto music club, is it too late to change the program?"

"I'm with the confectionery maker's alliance. Here's a sample of the cookies we're giving to the graduating seniors on the day."

I was stopped on the way by various groups involved in the "Third-Years' Farewell Party," and had to either answer them or take a memo. While this was happening, Maria-sama flew far, far away, and what was left behind was the "One, two, three, four," rhythm.

The number of people that called out to me had increased day by day. The event itself was the day after tomorrow, and everyone was busy making last minute changes.

"I'm from the choir~ club."

As I was opening the door to the Rose Mansion, a familiar voice called out to me from behind. When I turned around, I saw an unexpected face.

"Shizuka-sama! Oh, you surprised me."

"You look busy, hey."

Lillian's diva grinned. She'd soon be leaving Japan, to become an international diva.

"Ah, the choir club? Was there something you wanted to change?"

I asked, opening my student diary. I was more accustomed to this sort of thing.

"Ah, sorry. I was just calling out to you the same way everyone else did. What I'm here for today isn't related to the choir club."

Shizuka-sama said, waving both her hands.

"Unrelated to the choir club?"

"You were asking about borrowing some pianicas to bring to the Rose Mansion on Saturday, right? The music teacher said you could borrow up to five, so I came to let you know. How many did you need?"

"Pianicas?"

This was the first I'd heard about that, so I had no idea who to even refer her to.

"I was talking to a first-year music teacher about it ... right, I think she said it was Yoshino-san that asked."

"Yoshino-san?"

What on earth was she planning on doing with them?

"Can you wait here a moment?"

Yoshino-san was probably inside the Rose Mansion right now.

I raced up the creaking, groaning stairs, and opened the door to the second-floor room.

"Ah, Yumi-san, you're late."

Yoshino-san had been sitting down, checking over the printed programs, but she stood up when she saw me arrive.

"Alright, let's go to the art room and pick up the signboard. After that we have to see the flower arranging club too."

Yoshino-san was the only person in the room. Belatedly, I realized it would have been quicker to have Shizuka-sama accompany me and then they could have talked here, and this had me feeling a bit down.

"What's the matter?"

"Shizuka-sama's here. About the pianicas."

"Oh, really?"

Yoshino-san placed the note saying, "Yumi, Yoshino: Go to the art room and flower arranging club," on the table and left the room.

"What do you need them for?"

I asked, following Yoshino-san down the stairs.

"I thought I'd get Shimako-san to play "El Bimbo" as background music to my magic act."

El Bimbo? Ahh, that dadah-dah dada-dah music that usually accompanies magic acts.

"You couldn't just use a cassette tape?"

"Sure, I could. But when I showed her the musical score, Shimako-san said that she should be able to play the melody part."

Yoshino-san smiled.

"And from a performance standpoint, this is more fun, right?"

"..."

That Yoshino-san. It looked like she was dragging Shimako-san into the world of comedy after all.

"Oh, so you only want one? But there's a couple of different types, so which type do you want?"

Shizuka-sama asked, having heard our conversation.

"Umm."

Yoshino-san was lost for words. I wouldn't know how to answer if asked which one I wanted either. You mean there's more than one type of pianica?

"Do you want to have a look in the music prep room? The teacher should still be there now."

"For sure. Ah ... but."

After her immediate response to Shizuka-sama's question, Yoshino-san looked at me, as though just remembering. She'd probably forgotten that we had to go the art room and the flower arranging club's room.

I declined the offer to accompany her. There was no point in having me look at pianicas.

"Come as soon as you've picked one, okay?"

I split off from Yoshino-san and Shizuka-sama at that point.

Then the sound of Yuuki's voice counting, "One, two, three, four," came back to me.

Part 2.

The art club's room was on the second floor of the arts building.

Still feeling the effects of my recent sprint up and down the Rose Mansion stairway, this completely normal staircase was tough on me right now. The two punch combo of shortness of breath and sore calf muscles.

"Oh, you're on your own?"

"Yeah. Shimazu Yoshino-san will be along in a bit."

"I see."

For some reason, the two girls there were chewing on something. On closer inspection, it turned out to be nothing more than plain white bread.

"Ah."

Noticing my rude gaze, the club president offered me some, saying, "Want something to eat?" but I politely declined her offer. I wasn't particularly hungry, and the smell of oil paints permeated the art room, removing any desire I may have had to eat.

"You use white bread instead of an eraser when you're doing charcoal sketches."

So that's what it was.

There was a plaster bust of the Venus de something or other between them, which they were sketching. There were a couple of things that looked like pencils, but were probably charcoal, scattered around the table.

"But you can only use the white, fluffy bits. Which inevitably means the crusts are left over."

So, not wanting to waste it, they ate it. That made sense. The charcoal mustn't have stuck to it.

"That's really good."

I mumbled, peeking at the picture on the easel. Using just the white of the paper and the black of the charcoal, they'd drawn something that looked like a black and white photograph.

"Thanks."

They were probably used to being praised, as they casually acknowledged the compliment.

"But rather than this, praise that."

The club president pointed at the signboard for the "Third-Years' Farewell Party." It was leaning against a corner of the wall, probably so it wouldn't get in the way of classes.

"Wow, that's incredible."

The letters really jumped out at me.

"I know, right. Rei-san told us to do it however we wanted, so we went with the high impact lettering they use for **sumo matches**."

"Sumo matches ... ah, the one they use for the professional rankings?"

"Yep. I'm pretty proud of it."

I thought I'd seen it somewhere before, and it was the font known throughout the country for displaying the names of the famous sumo grand champions and challengers. The dark black lettering on the white signboard read, "Third-Year's Farewell Party." It goes to show, simple is best.

"Mmm, it looks really professional."

They were as skilled with their lettering as they were with their charcoal sketches.

"More praise, more."

Cheerfully, they requested more compliments from me.

"It's very bold."

"One more."

"It's a masterpiece."

"Alright, take it, thief."

There were still plenty of interesting people in the school.

They handed the signboard over as though I'd just bought it cheap at an auction.

"But on that note, Shimazu Yoshino-san hasn't come."

"I think she's probably on her way here."

I strained and picked up the signboard.

They said they'd used quick drying paint on it, and I was relieved to find it dry to the touch.

"Are you okay? Sure it's thin, but it's about as tall as you, Yumi-san. Do you want us to help?"

"Ah, I'm fine. My energy's my sole redeeming feature."

"Oh my, there's nothing else?"

"Hahaha."

It was sad that I couldn't puff my chest out and say, "Sure there is." But my energy was my main selling point. Especially when these tough days kept coming one after the other.

"In that case, we'll clean up and head home."

The two art club members washed their hands and picked up the plaster bust.

"Oh, you're not having club activities?"

"Not today. We were just sketching to kill some time."

So normally there would be more club members. Thinking about it, that made sense.

"... Ah."

I'd figured it out. Since we told them we'd come by and pick up the signboard, they'd opened up the art room and were waiting. They didn't know when we'd get there, so they'd brought some white bread and spent the time sketching –

"Ah, don't drop it."

"Right."

I'd intended to farewell them with a respectful bow, but with the encumbrance of the signboard, all I could manage was a small nod.

The signboard artists, like all the behind-the-scene participants, were responsible for the cost of their materials, but they didn't have to handle delivery of the final goods. The thought, "That sort of distance must be nice," idly floated across my mind.

"Alright, let's do this."

Leaving the art room, I descended the stairs.

But climbing down the stairs holding the signboard was even tougher than I'd thought. Never mind restraint, if I went back and asked for help they'd probably give it, but regrettably it was too late now. If I had the strength to climb back up the stairs I'd just descended, then I could struggle down to the first floor.

One, two, three, four. One foot in front of the other, I silently walked on.

I left the arts building and persisted down the hallway, and, when the Rose Mansion was finally in view, Yoshino-san appeared.

"Don't tell me you've been carrying that all by yourself!?"

"Yeah."

I leaned the signboard against the wall and took a breather.

"I'm shocked. Since you were by yourself, shouldn't you have done the task that can be done by one person first?"

"Huh?"

"The vases from the flower arranging club. At they very least, I'm sure they'd be easier to carry than that."

"Ah, right."

I hadn't even thought about that until now.

"Don't just say, "Ah, right.!""

As she spoke, Yoshino-san helped lift the signboard. It was a heck of a lot easier with two people carrying it.

As decided in an earlier meeting, the signboard was going to be kept in the storage room on the first floor of the Rose Mansion until Saturday, so it wouldn't get dirty. There was already a pianica case in there, from a previous visitor.

Pianicas came in many types, but signboards were more simple and while they came in various sizes, they all had the same structure. Naturally, Yoshino-san had borrowed the pianica with the largest keyboard. She liked to be prepared for any eventuality.

"Yumi-san, you can take a break if you want."

Yoshino-san said, mindful of the heavy labor I'd done earlier, but I shook my head.

"I'm fine."

I posed with my arms up, like a bodybuilder showing off their muscles.

"My energy's my sole redeeming feature."

That had become my pet phrase recently. I'd say it when I was feeling tired so my body would think it was fine, and I could keep pushing on.

Incidentally, speaking of the vases we borrowed from the flower arranging club. They were about the size of hibachi ovens, and just as heavy to boot, so there was no way one person could have moved them.

Part 3.

So after all that, my arms were aching that evening.

"Yuuki, sorry, can you rub my shoulders?"

I pounced on my younger brother as he left the bath, and dragged him into my room.

"Why do I have to?"

"I'll buy you a caramel next time."

"Do you think I'm in elementary school or something?"

Whine, whine, whine. But he was kind, so he fulfilled his older sister's request.

"Whoa, your shoulders are stiff. What on earth have you been doing at school, Yumi?"

"Preparing for the third-years' farewell party."

Carrying signboards and vases the size of hibachi ovens.

"It's a girls school, but you're doing manual labor?"

"It's because it's a girls school. After all, there's not a single guy there."

Like all-boy schools, all-girl schools had their own set of problems.

"Ah ha. Don't overdo it, though."

"It's in two days time. I have to overdo it."

"Easy to say, but will your body hold up?"

"_"

"Yumi?"

"Mmm ... yeah!"

I'd dozed off, without noticing. I'd been dreaming, momentarily, but was awoken by me onee-sama scolding me.

"Just go to sleep."

Shocked, Yuuki left my room.

"Yeah."

That was how I answered him, but I couldn't go to bed just yet.

I had to practice the moves that Yuuki had shown me, as well as organizing my books for tomorrow.

Ahh, that reminded me of something I'd read.

– This was surely an authentic example of midnight training.

Friday

Part 1.

"Oh no."

By the time I woke up, it looked like I'd be cutting it close to get to school on time. I just put on my uniform and left without having breakfast.

"You answered me when I called out to you, so I thought you were awake."

My mom was panicking. But I was a high-school student, so it wasn't my parents' fault if I was late. Even so, my alarm must have stopped at some point. I just couldn't be late.

When I got to the main road, I saw the bus coming behind me, so I forced my leaden body to sprint. I made it to the bus stop just in time, boarded the bus, and breathed a momentary sigh of relief. But the bus was crowded, and the man next to me reeked of alcohol, so for the first time in ages I felt carsick.

The bus I changed to at M station was filled mainly with Lillian students, so there wasn't the smell of alcohol, but despite that I kept feeling worse and worse, and couldn't get back to normal.

I wasn't late to school, but I was completely exhausted by the time I made it to the classroom.

"You're not looking well, are you okay?"

Shimako-san asked, concerned, when she saw my face.

"Yeah. My energy's my sole redeeming feature."

But my magical spell wasn't working today.

Part 2.

Near the end of forth period, I collapsed.

I kept urging myself on, repeating "energy" in my mind, but in the end it was no good.

I'd been called upon by our teacher to answer a maths problem, and as I was facing the blackboard, chalk in hand, I felt disoriented, then shook violently.

Somehow, I was able to calmly analyze the situation – it was the scene you so often see in TV dramas or manga books. The chalk snaps, then falls to the floor in slow motion, followed by the graceful collapse of the heroine.

But reality was non-fiction. In a TV drama, they can do numerous takes, cut and start again if it's no good. To say nothing of the fact that I wasn't the heroine type.

Even after I'd turned pale and everything had gone dark, I was still alert enough to think, "At this rate, I'll fall and hit my head," and, "I don't want brain damage," so I crumpled at the knees, landing on my butt and preventing it from being a serious accident.

But because of that, I guess everyone thought it was just a joke at first. I had a faint but distinct memory of hearing a moment of laughter as I sat there, unable to stand up.

Maybe it's at times like this that your true character shines through.

It's a pitiful story, but that's the truth.

When I opened my eyes, I was lying on the bed in the school infirmary.

I had a hazy memory of Shimako-san and Tsutako-san carrying me here, my arms around their shoulders. After that, it looks like I slept for a while.

"Too much work and not enough sleep, huh."

The school nurse asked, seeing me open my eyes.

"But it's not exam time, so what on earth have you been doing?"

"... All sorts of things."

"All sorts of things, huh."

The nurse repeated my words, then clapped her hands together as though remembering something.

"Ahh, right. You're Ogasawara Sachiko-san's petit soeur, aren't you?"

"What's that about my onee-sama?"

I sat up on the bed. No matter the circumstances, the name "Ogasawara Sachiko" would always draw a response from me.

The nurse laughed.

"She came here at lunch. You shouldn't worry her like that."

"..."

I could kind of remember it. Her hand touching my forehead, her eyes looking at me with concern.

"Do you feel up to eating your lunch?"

"... Yes."

I climbed down from the bed, and started to eat my lunch hunched over the nurse's desk. One of my classmates had brought my coat and lunch box, so I didn't have to go back to the classroom.

Since I hadn't had breakfast, there's no way my stomach was full. But even when I brought the food to my mouth, I could only swallow tiny amounts.

I was crying.

I'd been so stupid, I didn't know what to do.

(Silly Yumi. It's because you pushed yourself too hard.)

On the surface, my onee-sama's words were as cold as her hand had been. But they also contained a warm sorrow. By touching my forehead she was definitely trying to convey something to my heart, but that left me feeling even more depressed.

Once more, I'd burnt out too soon.

That's how I always was.

I'd get engrossed in something, get carried away all by myself, push right to the edge, and then overstretch and fail.

Sachiko-sama had watched me sleep for about 15 minutes, then left.

I knew that for Sachiko-sama, who was busy preparing for tomorrow's "Third-Years' Farewell Party," fifteen minutes of lunch time was an incredible amount of time.

I looked at my watch. It was right in the middle of sixth period.

(Take your time and rest.)

Those words were still floating around the infirmary. It seemed like Sachiko-sama had left them there on parting, and my tears flowed once more.

I truly felt like I wasn't worthy of her kindness.

"Oh? You're in a bad enough shape to be crying, but you're still eating?
What's going on?"

I turned around, and Rosa Gigantea was standing in the doorway, a befuddled look on her face.

"Or is it that you're feeling unwell because the nurse is forcing you to eat?"

"Ah, don't say such disrespectful things, Satou-san. It's not like she's being kept in detention until she finishes eating."

The nurse appeared from deeper in the room with a strained smile on her face.

"Ah, pardon me. I didn't realize you were there. I came to pick up Fukuzawa. Is it okay if I take her with me?"

Rosa Gigantea had arrived wearing her coat and carrying her school bag. From that I could clearly tell that she was going to take me home, and not back to the classroom.

"You're going to escort her, Satou-san?"

"Yeah. My class is only doing self-paced study, and her shepherd asked me to."

"Her shepherd? Ah, you mean Ogasawara-san?"

"Yes."

Right in front of me, the nurse and Rosa Gigantea laughed openly. Still, shepherd. It was indeed true that Sachiko-sama was always helping me.

"Umm, I'm fine now."

I'd finished forcing my lunch down my throat. While I had collapsed, it was because of the combination of fatigue, lack of sleep, no breakfast, and motion sickness. Now that I'd had some sleep and eaten lunch, all of the causes had been addressed.

"I know, I know."

Rosa Gigantea nodded, listening to my appeal. But even as she agreed, she methodically gathered up my now empty lunch box, put it in my bag and otherwise prepared to leave.

"Umm."

"I know you're fine. But even so, that's all for today."

Her tone of voice was kind, but left no room for argument.

"I have to get the flowers ... and the auditorium has to be set up ... "

With lingering regret, I counted out my after school duties on my fingers. Then Rosa Gigantea reached down and grabbed my hand, squeezing it into a ball.

"Someone else will take care of those things. All the tasks were clearly assigned, right?"

"... Yes."

"Then they'll all take a share of your tasks, Yumi-chan. That's what friends do."

"..."

"If you were there, they'd all be worried about you instead. Right?"

As expected of Rosa Gigantea. She knew all about falling down. I didn't say anything back to her, I just hung my head and looked down.

Part 3.

Rosa Gigantea escorted me all the way to bus stop at the south gate of M station, where I transfer to my second bus. I stubbornly refused her offer to escort me home.

They'd find out sooner or later, but for now I wanted to keep the fact that I collapsed during class and left school early a secret from my family. Things were a bit down at school, and I didn't want to drag that feeling into my home.

"Alright."

Rosa Gigantea relented, sensing my reluctance. If I'd been staggering she probably would have insisted on accompanying me, but I was walking fine and the color had returned to my face, so she probably judged that I was okay.

"Sachiko won't be angry."

As we parted, Rosa Gigantea slipped something into my handbag.

"Drink this, you'll feel better, and tomorrow you'll be right as rain."

On the bus, I took it out to have a look, and it was some kind of energy supplement drink.

When I got home, I had some of the energy drink to see what it was like. It tasted a bit like kid's cough syrup. A warmth spread throughout my body, but even after I drank it all, there wasn't really much other effect. Maybe that meant that my body was already back to normal. Assuming my body was still in a bad state, the only evidence of that now was my aching limbs.

"What's that?"

Dad asked, looking on in surprise, when I went to throw the empty bottle in the kitchen bin just before dinner.

"One of the seniors gave it to me."

"Don't you go to an all-girls school?"

"Yep."

"I guess there's old geezer high-school girls out there."

That was exactly how she was, so I couldn't offer a defense of Rosa Gigantea. But my mom was nearby and I didn't want to shatter her illusions, so I made absolutely sure not to mention the name "Satou Sei."

I phoned Sachiko-sama just after 8:30, to apologize for what happened.

The feeling of tension I had about calling my onee-sama hadn't really changed from before. But this time around, I wasn't as nervous about what I would do if one of her family members answered the phone, instead that nervousness was targeted at my onee-sama.

I clung to Rosa Gigantea's statement that Sachiko-sama wouldn't be angry, and rushed into the real thing, without doing a rehearsal.

Ring-ring, ring-ring, ring-ring ... After ringing five times, Sachiko-sama herself picked up the phone.

"Hello."

"Yumi?"

Surprisingly, my onee-sama said my name before I could.

"Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I worried you."

"You really did."

Harsh words, but her voice was light. Conceitedly, I thought this was because she was relieved to hear my voice.

"I took some time to reflect. That it may have been because I put too much of a burden on you."

"No."

I wholeheartedly rejected that notion. The collapse was solely due to my own ineptitude, and my onee-sama was in no way responsible for it.

"I missed breakfast, and I haven't been getting enough sleep, and I had motion sickness on the bus. It was all of those things added together."

" – You haven't been getting enough sleep?"

"It's because I've been practicing my party performance."

"Party performance – ?"

Then I remembered that we'd been keeping the party performances a secret and thought I'd blown it, but Sachiko-sama didn't question me further.

"So tomorrow – "

Before Sachiko-sama could finish her question, I answered forcefully.

"I'll be there, definitely. I'm going to get a good night's sleep tonight, then eat all my breakfast and head to school."

I rattled off like a machine-gun, before Sachiko-sama could say, "will you come to school?"

"I see."

Sachiko-sama said, after a bit of a pause.

Make sure you do. – I could tell she was smiling wryly.

Saturday

Part 1.

I went to the Rose Mansion the following day, and when everyone first saw me they were initially relieved, but then switched to a reproving expression.

"Did you have breakfast?"

Sachiko-sama asked, as she put the roses back into a bucket after cutting off their stems.

"I ate it all up."

"Tell me if things get tough."

"Okay."

I actually wanted to reply with, "I'm fine," but that would probably be taken as false bravado, so I responded meekly.

The roughly 200 roses that I was supposed to receive, and a small amount of water, were all arranged in a bucket. They'd be put in vases to decorate the stage, then at the conclusion of the ceremony one would be given to each of the third-years.

The color of the roses was salmon pink. A blend of red, white and yellow. It was the color that everyone had decided upon.

"Alright, we should get going soon."

At 8:00am, we stood up.

The whole-school "Third-years' Farewell Party" was going to take place during the morning.

Yoshino-san took the roses from the bucket, wrapped a piece of newspaper around them, said, "Here," and handed them to me.

"You know, because of my heart condition, I've always been a weakling. So I know how you're feeling better than anyone, Yumi-san."

"Right, right. Don't worry about it. I'm used to Yoshino."

Rei-sama said, then she and Yoshino-san lifted one of the hibachi oven sized vases borrowed from the flower arranging club.

Similarly, the art club's bold signboard was carried by Sachiko-sama and Shimako-san. Two beautiful women lined up together performing manual labor. It was the sort of idyllic scene one would pray for.

"Are you okay?"

"Just a little bit further."

They'd call out from time to time, as we headed towards the auditorium.

I wanted to cry. But they weren't the self-loathing tears of yesterday afternoon, they were tears of happiness brought about by my gratitude to my friends.

But Shimako-san's cry caused those tears to quickly evaporate.

"Oh no, Yumi-san."

"What? Gya!"

I wailed like a monstrous child. Since the roses had only been simply wrapped in newspaper, the water that they had until recently been sitting in had trickled down the stems.

"I'm so sorry."

Yoshino-san earnestly apologized, but that didn't achieve anything. We were out of the school building, so there was nowhere convenient to set them down temporarily, and everyone else was busy carrying other things so there was no-one I could get to help.

I had no choice but to run to the assembly hall, but by the time I got there the front of my skirt was soaked.

Part 2.

In the end, I had to attend the formal "Third-Years' Farewell Party" in my sweatpants and sweatshirt.

My uniform was hanging up in the Rose Mansion. It would probably be dry by the time I went home, but being the only person wearing their gym uniform in a sea of school uniforms was a huge mental blow.

"What happened?"

Other students insensitively asked, when they saw me in the auditorium. At first I tried to carefully explain, but that took too long and was kind of annoying, so after a while I simply answered with, "It's easier to move around in."

"Oh, my, you didn't wet yourself?"

As I listened to this frivolous drivel, I idly thought about the reason why this had happened.

Maria-sama, this is my penalty for pushing myself too hard, right?

I looked out the entrance of the auditorium and up at the sky, but there were clouds in the way, so the blue sky was too far away to be seen.

The party had been a great success.

The desire of the school clubs and other groups to do something for the seniors that they were indebted to shone through, the musical program went just as rehearsed and was magnificent, the displays that lined the auditorium entrance and lobby were all masterpieces.

Well, that was my opinion.

One of the goals of the "Third-Years' Farewell Party" was, obviously, to be entertaining, but a large part of it was also to reassure the graduating seniors.

We'll take good care of all that you've built. So you don't have to worry about us anymore. – That message came through loud and clear.

Having successfully organized this big event, the three boutons were already splendid Roses. I was still a small, green rose bud, and all I could do was keep going, but without overdoing it and melting down.

As I handed out roses to the graduating seniors, I glanced over at Shimako-san and Yoshino-san.

It'll probably be fine.

If I can avoid overestimating, or underestimating, my own worth, and if we can all rely on each other like now, then we'll surely see it through together.

"There's nothing painful about filling in for someone you like."

That's what Shimako-san had said when I apologized to her about making her pick up my slack.

"You would have done the same for me, right Yumi-san?"

That's right, Shimako-san.

I'd happily do the work of Shimako-san, or Yoshino-san, or Sachiko-sama, or Rei-sama, or any of the Roses, or Tsutako-san, or Katsura-san, ... any of the people I loved.

The roses, their stems cut short, were pinned to the third-years like corsages.

My eyes were dazzled by the brilliant, proud flowers.

The color of the chosen flowers was a mixture of red, white and yellow.

I'd never considered it before now, but salmon pink had become my favorite color.

Bonus

What the heck is this? – I, Mizuno Youko, thought, my eyes and mouth wide open. It took a while before I could comprehend the situation.

Yoshino-chan was doing magic.

Behind her, Shimako was playing "El Bimbo" on a pianica.

An incredibly strange spectacle. Something from a dream, and seeing it outside of one was shocking. At any rate, an atmosphere completely different to the usual tea party had, for now, filled the entirety of the Rose Mansion's second-floor room.

"Ta-dah."

In time with her voice, a stuffed toy made from towels rose from the empty box. Given the current situation, it was probably supposed to be a dove, but it looked more like a rat with wings. I've known this for a while now, but despite being Rei's cousin, Yoshino-chan really didn't have any talent for handicrafts.

But she was quite proficient at sleight of hand tricks. Pulling a 500-yen coin she'd gripped in her right hand from the breast pocket of Eriko's uniform.

"I'm not your audience plant."

Despite her frequent heckling, Eriko seemed to be enjoying herself.

This was probably part of the "entertainment."

Sei had asked her, "Yoshino-chan, what are you doing?" and then the first-years had taken the initiative to line up some chairs, creating improvised guest seating. At first, I'd been flustered, not knowing what was going on.

"This is your doing, isn't it, Rosa Gigantea."

Sachiko muttered, not taking her eyes off the stage.

"Ta-dah."

Yoshino-chan whipped her hat off. And there, on her head, was a flower made of feathers.

"What ever do you mean?"

Sei played dumb, but she obviously knew something. I listened in on their conversation.

"Ta-dah."

At some point, Yoshino-chan's head-flower had turned into a rope.

"You spouted some nonsense to Yumi. About party performances and the like."

"Ah, you found out?"

It had only taken a bit of light prodding from Sachiko for Sei to quickly confess.

"I told her it was an annual custom and she believed me. But it's fine. This party's supposed to be for our enjoyment, right?"

Such an egocentric way of thinking. Not even considering the trouble she was causing for others.

"But the reason Yumi collapsed was because she wasn't getting enough sleep."

"Oh, really? Sorry about that. An energy drink should make up for it."

I didn't really understand what she meant by that last remark, but it looked like Sei had tricked the first-years into putting on this show.



However, the usual tradition was to have a tea party where everyone sat around chatting. Everyone would reminisce about the good times and the bad, and not want to leave. At least, that's how the two farewell parties I'd been involved with had gone.

"Thank-you all very much."

Yoshino-chan and Shimako bowed quickly. It looked like the magic show was over. I'd been deep in thought, so I hadn't caught much of it.

(However.)

Rei was applauding so wildly it was embarrassing to watch. The complete fool of an older sister. But then again, that was one of her good points.

Following on from that, Shimako unfurled a folding fan. Then, without a moment's delay, Yoshino-chan switched the cassette deck on. Oh, she's about to start a traditional Japanese dance. Shimako's an accredited master of some dancing style whose name I can't remember.

But the intro was unmistakeably "Maria-sama's Soul."

(No way. She's not going to dance to this ...)

The unthinkable became reality.

Shimako slumped down, obviously not intentionally. The song was a complete mismatch for traditional Japanese dance. It looked like she hadn't been informed of the chosen song beforehand, for whatever reason.

While the song may have been a mismatch for the style of dancing, it fit perfectly with her Lillian's uniform. On top of that, the folding fan was the same one that Yoshino-chan had been using early for her sleight of hand tricks.

When opened, it showed the word "Bravo!" written in red ink, and bit by bit this started to draw the laughter out of me.

I focused my strength on my stomach muscles and clamped down on it. No dancer wants to be laughed at.

If I laugh, I lose, pff-ff-ff. It was a bit like a stare-down.

Even so, Shimako had the spirit of a master and danced gracefully. She seemed to be improvising the choreography and changing her moves to fit the lyrics. As you'd expect from a master.

Sei was cheering her on loudly.

Eriko was clapping to the beat too.

(Ahh, I see. It's okay to laugh.)

The way I was analyzing things was pretty pathetic and at that point I realized that further reflection would be even more absurd, so I decided to just sit back and enjoy it.

"Maria-sama's soul, it is a – "

I joined in singing at the third verse. I hadn't been at Lillian's since kindergarten, but I knew the song well. I'd been taught it by my adorable petit soeur, Sachiko.

Shimako danced brilliantly as everyone else sang in the choir.

Now then.

Yumi-chan was last up.

Yoshino-chan switched the tape and pressed play.

I waited in anticipation for what she was going to do, then Yumi-chan appeared on stage with a spotted bandana and basket covering her face. It oddly matched her tracksuit pants and sweatshirt.

This is – it took my breath away. That figure – no way, there's no way it could be that.

<~Yasuki~>

But what I thought it couldn't be was, in fact, the reality. The music flowing from the tape was the Shimane prefecture specialty, the "Yasuki Bushi." But normally it was a male dance.

I had to hand it to Yumi-chan, she lived up to expectations. The folk song, also called "Loach Scooping," was absurdly funny.

When she lowered the basket, revealing her face, I couldn't help but laugh out loud. A five-yen coin, held in place by string threaded through the

hole in the coin and fastened around her ears, pressed down on her nose, making for a funny face. That she'd go so far was magnificent.

My laugh seemed to tip everyone else over the edge, and the room was suddenly filled with a roar of laughter.

<~Ara essa ssa~>

As for Yumi-chan.

She dug at the mud with her feet, putting a loach in to the basket.

The loach escaped, then she had to catch the slippery thing.

Her movements and facial expression – for a party trick it was a splendid performance. I laughed so much my stomach was in knots.

As I laughed, I caught sight of Sachiko from the corner of my eyes, and again I was surprised.

(... Right.)

Sachiko, not usually one to smile, was laughing so hard she had tears streaming down her face.

This would have been unthinkable to the old, inflexible Sachiko. Back then, she would have angrily dragged her petit soeur down from the stage, to stop her acting so foolishly.

Sachiko was slowly but surely changing.

With that, I thought that I had no regrets left at Lillian's.

I could graduate with peace of mind.

<~Yasuki~ bushi~>

Yumi-chan's dance reached its finale.

If there was one thing I was disappointed about, it was that I wouldn't be alongside them when the current first-years became Roses.

<~Ara essa ssa, da mon naa~>

That unorthodox school council would definitely be something to look forward to.

A Short Interlude

What was it about him that charmed me?

I couldn't sum it up in just one word.

To try and put it into words, it was his existence itself.

The thrill I felt when I first met him was like the excitement of buying all those shiny new textbooks at the start of the new school year.

The city zoo.

I'd grown tired of my everyday life and my feet turned towards the zoo, seeking refuge in the unexpected. I probably wanted to look at some living being that wasn't a human. So I would have been just as happy in the botanical gardens, or the insect enclosure. But the zoo was closest to where I was supposed to meet my older brother that day, so I hadn't looked any further.

I aimlessly wandered around, looking at the various animals. Their smell filled the air, but I soon became accustomed to it.

Then at the elephant enclosure, I encountered a curious scene.

From where I stood behind him, it looked like steam was rising from this man. At first I thought it was smoke from a cigarette, but that was wrong. While staring fixedly, I surmised he was carrying something like steamed pork buns.

At that point, he looked over his shoulder.

"Do you want something to eat?"

Probably because I'd been looking at his hands.

This bearded, bear-like man split his roasted sweet potato and offered me some. Still lost in confusion, I accepted and ate it.

It didn't feel like a new form of flirting. He seemed to have completely forgotten about me, with all his attention devoted to the other side of the fence. The elephant filled his mind, and even when I called out to him he didn't notice immediately.

"Would you like some tea?"

I asked a man, for the first time in my life.

"Huh?"

"As thanks for the food."

I pointed at a vending machine. At that point, he finally seemed to remember. That I was the girl he shared his roasted sweet potato with.

"Thanks."

We sat on a bench and drank hot canned coffee.

"Do you have today off work?"

I asked, my interest still piqued. He was at the zoo during the middle of a weekday, but he didn't look like a businessman skipping out on work. He told me he was a high-school science teacher, and he sometimes came to the zoo on days when he didn't have classes.

"You came to look at the elephant?"

"Why do you think that?"

"Because you were staring at it so intently."

Was my reasoning correct? He laughed like a kid that had been caught while up to mischief.

"Yeah. I like big animals."

"Big animals? Like whales?"

"Whales are alright. But what I really want to see are dinosaurs."

Then he muttered, "But that's not going to happen," and took another sip of the canned coffee.

"So why do you come to the zoo? They don't have dinosaurs, right?"

I kept asking, question after question. His story kept me wanting more.

"To imagine. Like, when I look at this elephant, I think, okay, the stegosaurus was probably about this big. Or when I see a giraffe, I think the brontosaurus probably moved its neck like this."

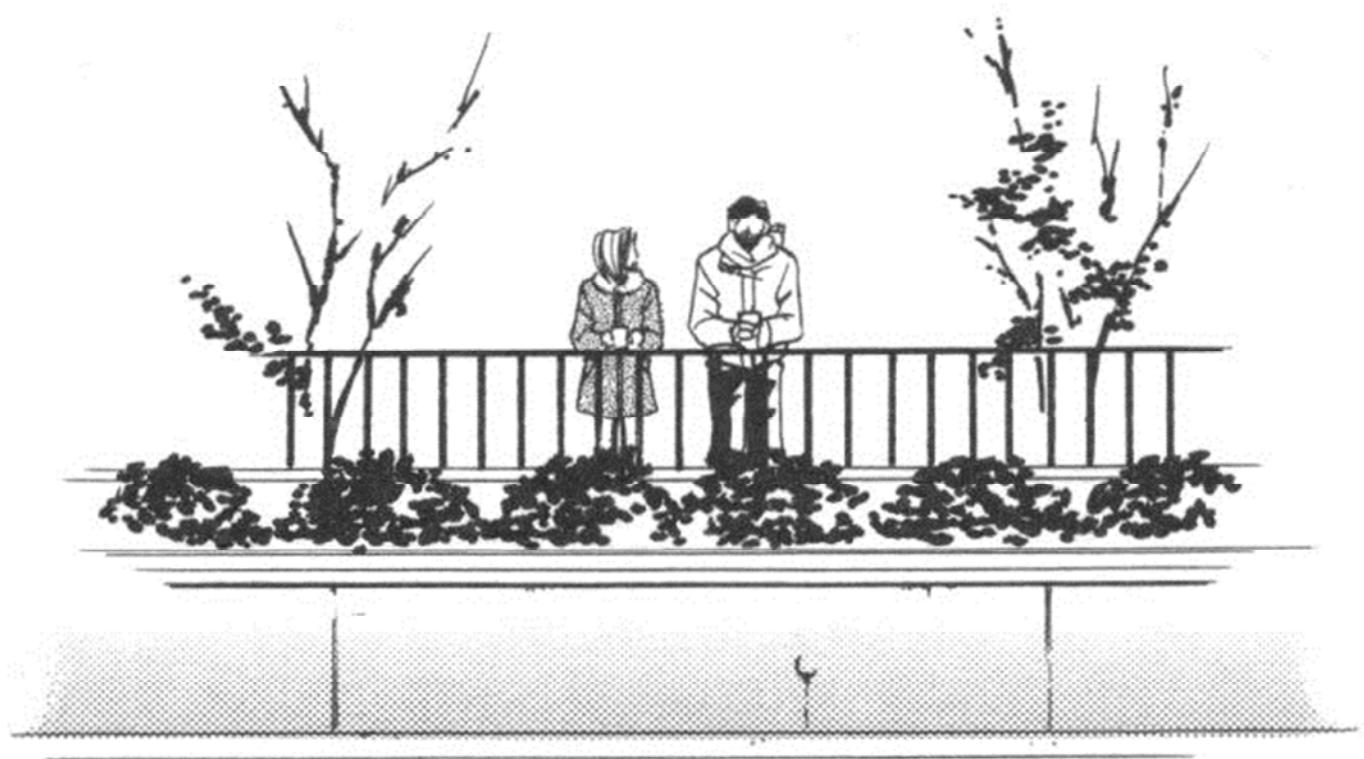
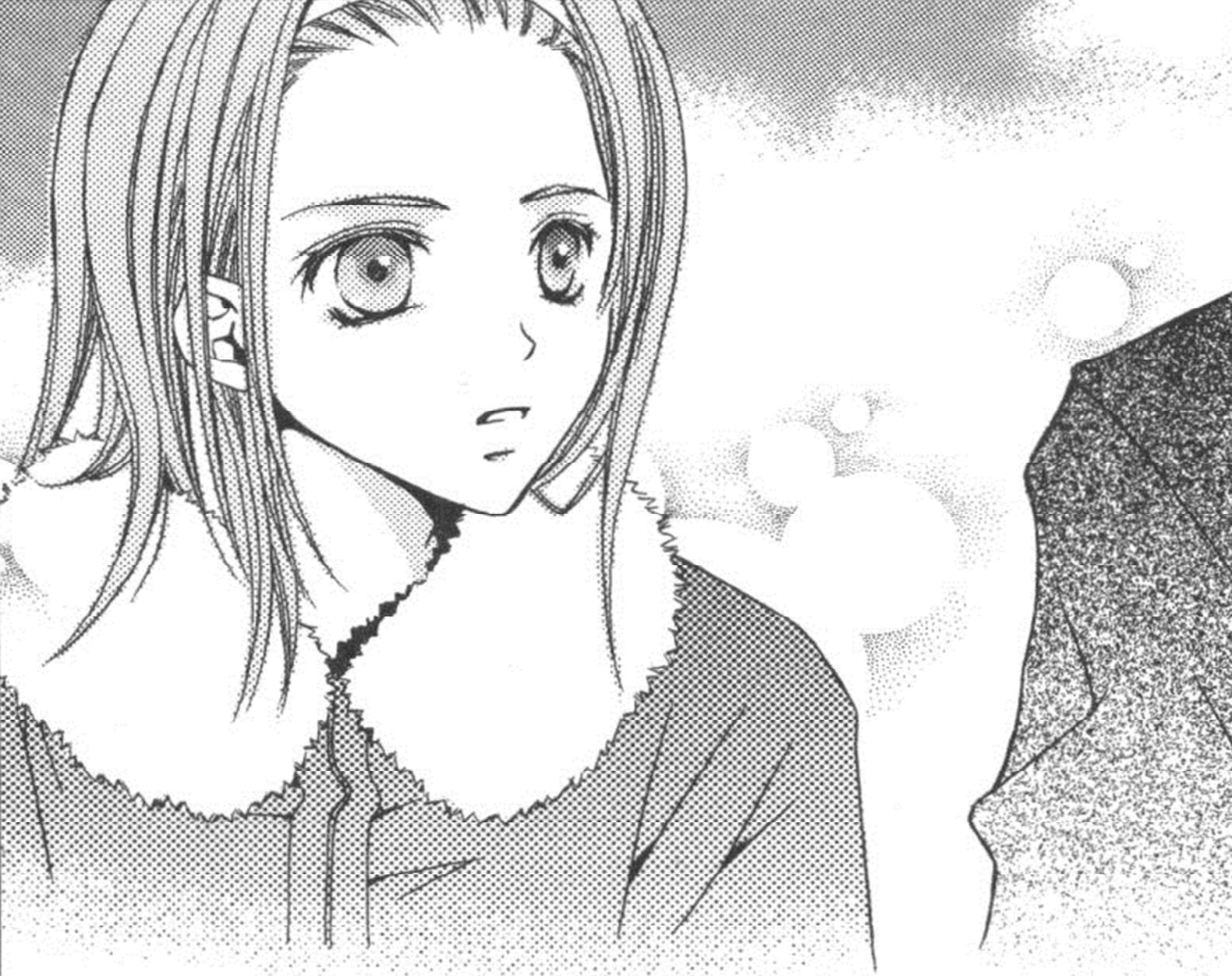
He also said that he'd occasionally go to construction sites because cranes and excavators gave him a sense of dinosaurs too. But while they had the same size, they weren't as good because they didn't have the same bone structure or move the same way. Having flesh on the outside must make it a lot easier to picture them as living beings too.

"So you're not interested in the real thing, only a substitute?"

I said, a bit rudely. But he smiled and answered.

"I'm interested in the real thing too."

That's how I came to know that he dug for fossils.



"And me?"

I asked, spinning around after putting the empty coffee can in the recycling bin.

"Huh?"

He asked in return.

"When you look at me, are you reminded of a dinosaur?"

"Let's see. A hypsilophodon, I guess. A stegosaurus would be a bit bigger."

I felt a thrill, having never been compared to a dinosaur before. I'd never met someone like this.

"Thanks for the coffee."

He politely thanked me, then rose from the bench. He slowly walked over, and placed his can in the steel bin next to me.

"See ya."

As I watched him walk away, my heart cried out, "Wait!" He'd talked to me as we drank our cans of coffee, but I still wasn't satisfied.

I wanted to know more.

Things like his name, about his family, and his favorite food. Oh right, about his favorite dinosaur too –

I thought, "Next time, we'll have to a much more leisurely cup of coffee."

Afterword

This story is a work of fiction.

All events, people and corporations are made up.

Hello, this is Konno.

I'm not Minako, but I thought I'd write that disclaimer just in case.

Now then, March has finally arrived at Lillian's Girls Academy. As everyone knows, March is graduation season. Following that line of reasoning, recently I've received letters expressing sorrow for the Roses' graduation.

So, this is the "Maria-sama ga Miteru" graduation special. This book is the first-half (like with "Valentine's Gift," the Valentine's Day special).

However, counting the short one, this book is three stories. So, while I called it the "first-half," it's the same as normal.

Hmm, what should I write about?

Actually, I'd been repeatedly told, "You can only have one page for the afterword," so I didn't think about anything. My supervisor was very apologetic when they informed me that this had been changed to three pages, saying:

"You can write two pages bagging out your supervisor."

But that doesn't mean I'm just going to say, "Ahh, right," and do that, as it would be rather childish.

Ahh, right.

I've kept forgetting to say this, but the editor that had been supervising me has been replaced with an actual supervisor. This happened during the first-half of "Valentine's Gift," well, officially it was at the start of the second-half. From a younger lady to an older man. A 180 degree change.

As for my new supervisor. I'm not sure of the average age of Cobalt's readers, but if we assume it's high-school age, then he'd be old enough to be

their father. Hearing someone like that say things like "Rosa Gigantea" ... hahaha. (← bagging ends here).

Regardless of the book, the way I write them is the same, and this was outlined in the afterword of the previous book from the "Shrine of Dreams" series. It hasn't changed my feelings in terms of happiness or sorrow, but since I've started writing "Maria-sama ga Miteru," I've started to notice points where I think, "Ah, that's a bit different." Those are parts where my personal life appears in the novel.

There's a lot of essays that do things like sell family embarrassment piece-by-piece, and it's somewhat close to that. I won't say which part though.

Obviously this can't happen with my other series, "Shrine of Dreams" and "Surippishu!" but the setting of "Maria-sama – " is more direct. See, material from Japan can't show up in the daily life of the nobility of a foreign country.

From here on out I'll probably be picking up more of this material. So prepare yourself, those around me. – or, refuse ahead of time.

Incidentally, the title "Yellow Rose at Full Speed" came from something my older sister said. When I was talking to her about the story, she commented, "Doesn't it feel like Yellow Rose's going at full speed?" Of course, "at full speed," was from a certain pet food commercial.

Ready or not, next up is the graduation ceremony.

Even I'm feeling a bit sad about bidding farewell to the beloved seniors.

Konno Oyuki.